

SLIPS, TRIPS AND FALLS



Health and Safety Guidance Note



NFU Mutual
RISK MANAGEMENT SERVICES

INTRODUCTION

Slips, trips, and falls are often seen as minor incidents or simply a case of human error which cannot be prevented. In reality, falls routinely cause more serious injuries in the workplace than any other health and safety issue and the risk can be minimised with the correct understanding of the underlying causes. This document outlines the common causes of slips, trips and falls that should be considered when investigating incidents and implementing controls to reduce risk.

WHAT ARE MY LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES?

The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 (HSW Act) [Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978] requires employers to ensure the health and safety of their employees and others who may be affected by their work activity. For instance, contractors have a general duty towards their client and vice versa. It also requires employees not to endanger themselves or others and use any safety equipment provided.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 [Management of Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Regulations] build on the HSW Act and include duties:

- on employers to assess slip and trip risks to employees and others who may be affected by their work activity and take action to control these risks;
- on those who employ cleaning contractors in their premises to make sure the contractors are given information on health and safety in those premises.

The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 [Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993] require floors to be suitable for the purpose for which they are used and free from obstructions and slip hazards.

The Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998 [Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999] require work equipment (for example scrubber-drier, mop) to be well maintained, the selection of suitable equipment and the provision of training in its use.

The Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 and The Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996 [Northern Ireland Regulations on Safety Representatives and Safety Committees, as amended by the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1992 and the Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996] require you to consult your employees on matters to do with their health and safety at work.

WHAT ARE SLIPS, TRIPS AND FALLS?

Slips and trips have different causes and will require different solutions to successfully reduce risk. Slips, trips, and falls can be defined as follows:

- Slip – a lack of grip causing uncontrolled sliding of the foot
- Trip – the pedestrian catching their foot on an obstacle causing a loss of balance
- Fall – an unrecovered loss of balance, this can occur because of a slip or trip but also for other reasons such as miss-placing your feet on stairs or vertigo related to health issues

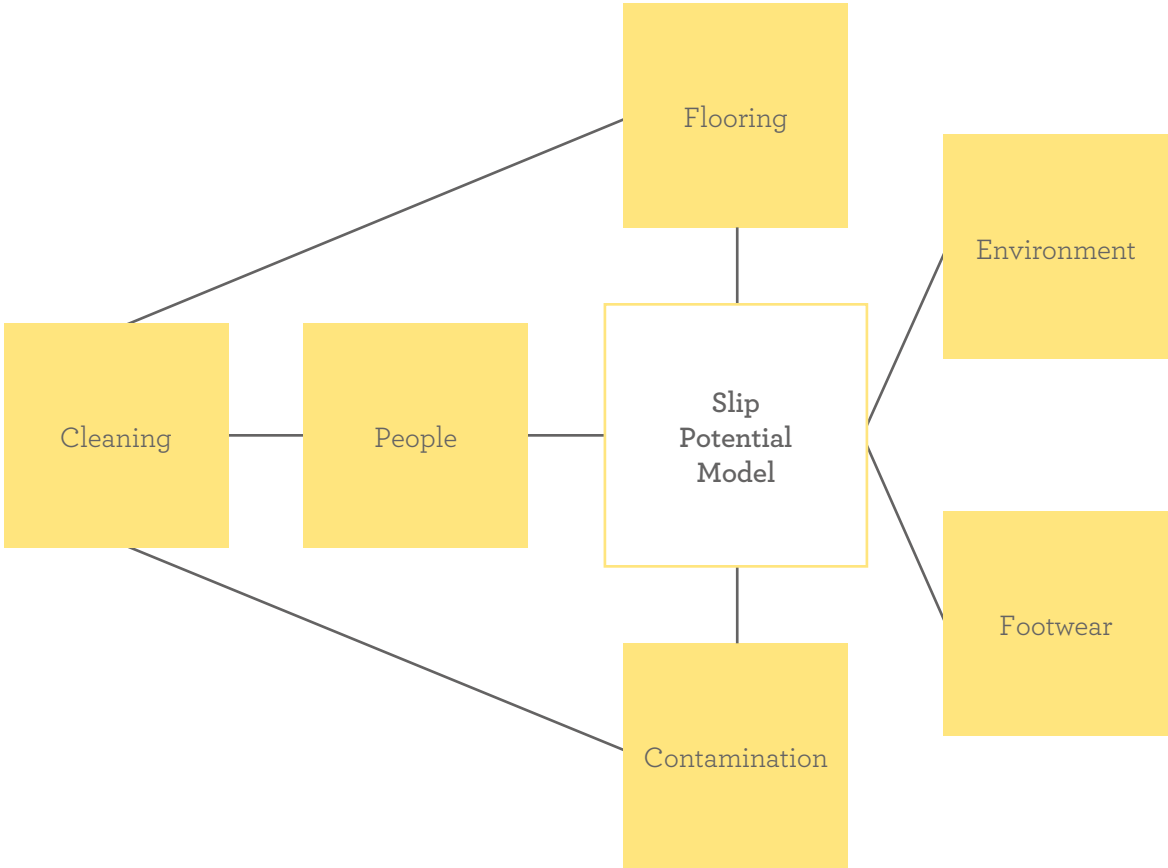
WHAT CAN I DO TO PREVENT SLIPS AND TRIPS?

As with all risks in the workplace, you need to manage the risks from slips and trips by firstly carrying out a risk assessment, which will help you decide on whether you are doing enough to prevent harm. You start by identifying where and when slips and trips could occur and then deciding what action to take to prevent these types of accidents. You then need to put the control measures you have identified in place. Concentrate on the real risks - those that are most likely to cause harm.

The HSE has developed a useful slips and trips hazards spotting checklist and a slips and trips mapping tool that can help with conducting your risk assessment. See Further Guidance below.

SLIPS

Slips are the most common cause of falls in most workplaces. The key contributing factors to slips are presented in the slip potential model below. One or more of the factors in the model may play a part in any slip accident. We will look at each component in more detail.



FLOORING

All flooring should provide suitable slip resistance when clean and dry, however very small amounts of contamination (such as water, oil or dust) can significantly increase the risk of slipping on smooth floors. Understanding the slip risk posed by the flooring in your workplace in different operating conditions is critically important when trying to minimise slip risk. Many flooring materials are available that are not slippery when wet, or even when contaminated with oil. These floors can be aesthetically pleasing and can be easily cleaned.

There are many different test methods used by floor manufacturers and suppliers to define slip resistance but very few are relevant to the risk presented when people walk on the floor. In the UK, the HSE and local authorities use the pendulum test, which can be considered the gold standard as it is directly relevant to pedestrian slipping and can be conducted on installed floors.

CONTAMINATION AND CLEANING

As clean, dry flooring is not normally slippery, preventing contamination getting onto the floor can be a practical way to prevent slips. However you don't need a lot of contamination to make smooth floors slippery (for example condensation, or the residual water left after cleaning), so you need to be realistic when considering contamination. If keeping floors completely clean and dry during normal use is not practical more controls will be needed.

Cleaning is a key control for preventing slips. Effective cleaning will successfully remove the contamination from a floor, reducing slip risk. The process of cleaning is as important as the equipment and chemicals used. The cleaning process itself can also introduce slip and trip hazards to cleaning operatives, other staff, and site visitors. Cleaning needs to be carefully planned, supervised, monitored, and reviewed to remain effective.

FOOTWEAR

Slip resistant footwear is available that can significantly reduce the risk of slips. Providing staff in high risk environments appropriate footwear may be the most cost-effective way of managing risk, however selecting appropriate footwear is made difficult by poor standards and much of the safety footwear currently marketed as slip resistant performs poorly in real workplaces. A more effective test is available from the HSE (GRIP Scheme – see Further Guidance below) that will help you to identify appropriate footwear for your environments if footwear is one of your key controls. Including the information from this test in your footwear specification will help you to effectively manage slip risk.

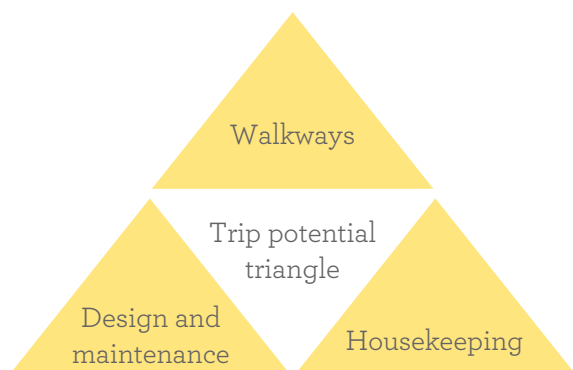
PEOPLE AND ENVIRONMENT

When investigating falls, it is easy to assume that they are simply caused by human error. Though all falls will involve an error by the pedestrian in maintaining a safe walking gait, the likelihood of that error is influenced by a range of environmental and task factors. By assuming that a fall was just human error without identifying these additional root causes, it is difficult to learn from an incident and make sensible improvements to prevent similar falls in the future.

A common example of the impact of human factors on the risk of slips, trips, and falls is the influence of alcohol, drugs, and mobile phone use. If an incident occurs where mobile phone use or the influence of drugs and alcohol is a factor, ensure that all the root causes are identified not just these obvious ones. If a pedestrian trips over an obstacle while using a mobile phone, and the investigation concludes that the fall was simply the result of human error due to distraction, you are not in a position to address the underlying hazard, and the risk will remain for all people using the area.

TRIPS

The key contributing factors to trips are presented in the trip potential triangle.



Source: HSE

You need to get all three right (walkways, housekeeping and design and maintenance), to prevent tripping accidents.

Trip hazards are often easier to identify than slip hazards, but this can lead to complacency when managing trip risk. Good housekeeping and storage planning can help to prevent trip hazards being left in walkways. Appropriate design, location and installation of equipment can also help to minimise the risk of trailing cables, exposed bolts and pipework in commonly accessed areas, etc. Where trip hazards cannot be easily eliminated (for example single steps or kerbs in car parks) they need to be clearly highlighted to give pedestrians the best chance of seeing them and crossing them safely. Planning access routes and work activities appropriately can minimise the need to access areas with unavoidable trip hazards.

STAIR FALLS

A fall on stairs, particularly when going down, often leads to serious injury and even death.

Falls on stairs are often seen as simply human error, but stair design has a huge influence on the likelihood of someone making a mistake when using the stair. Human behaviour is hard to control but good stair design reduces fall risk for all stair users. There are simple and inexpensive interventions that can make existing stairs safer. Providing suitably designed handrails and visible highlights on the treads are often the easiest initial improvements. The size of the steps and the consistency of the stair dimensions are also important.

Having a 'hold the handrail' policy that is well enforced and adhered to reduces the likelihood of people carrying items in both hands on the stair, a significant risk factor for stair falls, but the handrails need to be well designed in order to be effective.

INVESTIGATING SLIPS, TRIPS AND FALLS

When a fall occurs, it is crucial that a suitable investigation is conducted. This will allow contributing factors to be identified and appropriate interventions to be implemented to minimise the risk of a similar event in the future.

As discussed above, avoid jumping to the conclusion that the event was simply human error. Ensure that all the relevant human and environmental factors are identified and considered when determining the cause of the fall and implementing any controls to reduce risk. The testimony of the injured party and any eyewitnesses is important but be aware that falls happen very quickly, and even the person who fell may not be completely clear on how it happened. Although the words 'slip' and 'trip' are routinely used to explain a loss of balance, a personal account cannot be relied upon alone to determine all the relevant root causes. Examine and document the design and use of the area where the incident occurred, and consider the factors present above and in the relevant NFU Mutual toolkits.

By investigating incidents and studying other information, such as near miss reports or reports of maintenance defects, you can be proactive in identifying relevant solutions that will reduce the risk of falls before serious injury occurs.

INFORMATION, INSTRUCTION, TRAINING AND SUPERVISION

Once you have identified what hazards are present in the workplace, you need to make sure that those who are affected are informed of what they are and what they need to do to keep themselves safe. They must also be instructed on how they should conduct their work in a safe way and the importance of following the correct processes for cleaning, housekeeping, accident reporting etc.

General slip trip and falls awareness training is available for free online. The HSE has a free online learning tool, called the Slips and Trips eLearning Package, referred to as 'STEP' that you could ask your staff to complete.

This tool is designed for both employers and workers in all sectors, providing help on assessing and managing slip and trip risks in the workplace. It provides an overview of slips and trips, how they are caused and how to prevent them, from introductory to advanced level. See Further Guidance below.

It is important that those who supervise workers with specific responsibilities in relation to preventing slips and trips also understand the importance of the control measures and understand and where deviations may occur, so they can re-enforce processes and identify where future business changes may result in increased risks.

FURTHER GUIDANCE

- HSE website Slips and Trips: www.hse.gov.uk/slips/
- INDG Preventing slips and trips at work: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg225.pdf
- GEIS Assessing the slip resistance of flooring: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/geis2.pdf
- Slips and trips 2: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/web/slips02.pdf
- HSE Slips and trips eLearning package (STEP): www.hse.gov.uk/slips/step/index.htm
- HSE slips and trips hazard spotting checklist: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/ck4.pdf
- HSE slips and trips mapping tool: www.hse.gov.uk/slips/mappingtool.pdf
- HSE GRIP Scheme (footwear): www.hsl.gov.uk/hsl-shop/grip

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