**WALK SAFELY: AVOID SLIPS, TRIPS AND FALLS**

~Chris Schlechta, Rural Mutual Insurance Company, Safety and Loss Control Manager

When talking about “safety” a plethora of different images and ideas come to mind but how about something as simple as the way you walk?  Slips, trips and falls are consistently in the [**top 3 causes**](https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/work/work-overview/top-work-related-injury-causes/) for work related injuries accounting for 25.7% of all injuries and are the #1 cause of injuries at home.  In the workplace, falls alone resulted in 849 workplace fatalities and caused 261,930 workers to miss one or more days from work.  Fall protection in the workplace has been the #1 cited [**OSHA violation**](https://www.osha.gov/top10citedstandards) year after year since 2011.

When talking about slips, trips and falls I like to break it out into two distinct categories.  Slips and trips being the more common (and usually resulting in a fall) and falls from a height above ground level.  Gravity doesn’t discriminate based on age, and while we may be more predisposed to slips, trips, and falls the older we get, no one is immune.  In fact, injuries in the tub or shower are most common among those aged 15 to 24.

**COMMON CAUSES OF SLIPS AND TRIPS AND STRATEGIES TO AVOID THEM:**

1. **Wear proper footwear** appropriate for the conditions and the walking surfaces to be encountered.  Everyone has that favorite pair of well-broken in work boots but is there any traction left on the sole?  Everyone’s individual gait causes wear on different locations of the sole.  While overall the boot looks to be in good condition with a lot of tread left, be aware of the wear spots on the sole.
2. **Wet or icy surfaces**.  In Wisconsin, Spring is when the freeze/thaw cycle is more pronounced.  Warmer days thaw ice and melt snow creating wet conditions that are tracked into a building, and as soon as the sun sets…so does the ice outside.  Make sure that salt and/or sand are readily available to treat walking surfaces and [**sidewalks are kept clear**](https://www.ruralmutual.com/resource/home/6-winter-home-maintenance-tips/).  Inspect frequently due to weather and time of day changes.  Consider the use of properly anchored floor mats in the entryway to buildings, and the addition of friction surfaces or grit additive treatments to outdoor stairs and smooth surfaces.  In the workplace, use signs to warn pedestrians of wet surfaces.
3. **Shorten your stride** when walking on slippery surfaces. Some surfaces may require that you essentially shuffle to maintain proper balance.  When looking at the anatomy of how a slip occurs when the foot comes down to the surface, the first point of contact is the heel.  At this point the force being exerted is both down and forward of the person’s center of gravity.  Because only a portion of the heel makes first contact, there isn’t sufficient friction to prevent the slip.
4. **Ensure that walkways and stairs are adequately lit**and free of obstructions and entanglements that may cause someone to trip. 20% of slips and trips occur in low light conditions. Keep flashlights handy as even the most familiar path can be treacherous during a power outage.
5. **Ensure that items aren’t protruding into or left unattended in walkways.**Employ good housekeeping practices at home and work. Someone walking that same path for the 1,000th time might be on mental autopilot and not realize your latest delivery box was left square in their path.  When using temporary extension cords or hoses, make every effort to limit stretching those items across walkways.  Never store items on a staircase.
6. **Draw attention to hazards.** Vertical level changes in walking surfaces, such as a sunken or raised sidewalk, should be marked to draw attention to the trip hazard or corrected if the difference in levels is substantial.  There are a multitude of regulations covering different types of properties when it comes to walking surfaces, generally any deviation greater than 1” should be corrected.

**COMMON CAUSES OF FALLS:**

* **Working from a ladder at height.**  Ensure the ladder is in good condition, securely placed so that the foot of the ladder doesn’t kick out.  Use an appropriate height ladder for the job.  Numerous falls occur when someone is using an A-Frame Step ladder by standing above the highest step indicated for safe use.  This changes the weight balance making the ladder more prone to tipping over and causing a fall.  Ladder steps should have an aggressive texture to prevent slipping while climbing, and always use three points of contact while climbing a ladder.
* Look for areas where there is a **significant grade change** where someone may step off, not expecting the significant drop.  As a rule of thumb, any abrupt grade change greater than the standard height of a stair, should have some method of visual warning.  This could be colored marking or signage.  For homes, any deck/porch 24” or greater above ground level should have a railing.  In the workplace, any elevated walking surface that exposes an employee to a fall must have railings to include a top rail, mid-rail, and toe kick.
* Any work being completed at a height of 4’ or greater in the workplace (6’ for construction work) **requires the use of fall protection**. It’s important to understand that the fall protection system setup must not allow the employee to fall and come in contact with the ground or other objects on the way to the ground.

As silly as it sounds, learning to walk doesn’t stop when you are a toddler.  We often don’t give much thought to how we are walking and more specifically what we are walking on. Reconditioning our brain to think more about the how and where, will hopefully prevent you from becoming one of the statistics.