

Slips, trips and falls

a UNISON guide for members

UNISON
the public service union



Is your floor surface an accident waiting to happen?

Slips, trips and falls (STFs) are often seen as a joke, but can cause serious harm or even be deadly. And that is just on the flat. A STF from a height (whether for example, whilst on a ladder, scaffold, or step) is far more serious.

In catering and healthcare, STFs are the main cause of work related injury. With sharp tools, hard surfaces, and plenty of hot liquids and surfaces, kitchen injuries can be horrific. Hands and arms can end up on hot hobs or in fryers. One incident led to a death when a large knife which was being carried severed an artery.

Vulnerable or older patients are especially at risk if already infirm or because a simple STF injury such as a broken bone can lead to fatal complications. These may include thrombosis (blood clots) or embolisms (blocked blood vessels). One UNISON member in her twenties had to have her leg amputated following an incident at work, causing the loss of her job and leaving her unable to play the sports she loved.

In the education sector, large volumes of staff and pupils or students move around at the same time, not only making it harder to spot and avoid any STF hazards, but also making the consequence of a fall potentially far greater. Especially during an emergency evacuation, for example.

However, with STFs being the main cause of injuries at work, and almost half of all the serious injuries, all workers are at risk – including those in offices and those who work out and about.

Cleaning up!

Most slips occur in wet or contaminated conditions, and most trips are due to poor housekeeping or maintenance. So good housekeeping, maintenance, and a suitable cleaning regime can reduce STFs, but cleaning can also cause them.

It's best if regular cleaning takes place outside of normal hours when other staff are not around, especially wet cleaning. Wet cleaning a spillage in a busy environment can make it worse, so a dry method should be used with, if necessary, a wet clean later. Using the wrong product on specially treated non-slip floors can damage the special coating, which can then make the floor slippery.

Often, a combination of factors or a chain of events can lead to a situation where it's just a question of time before an incident occurs, but the solution to preventing STFs is often simple and cost effective.

See it, report it!

If you see a spillage or other STF hazard, report it to your employer so that they can deal with it immediately. This might mean cleaning up, moving or tidying an item, making a repair, or fencing off an area (even just temporarily until a permanent solution can be put in place).

On average there will be about 40 slips or stumbles causing no or only minor injury before a major injury occurs. So make sure you record all near-misses and all STFs – no matter how small – in the accident book. A near-miss is where you could have had a STF or injury but didn't. For the same reason, your employer should then consider each recorded event, and decide if any action needs to be taken to prevent or reduce the chance of it happening again.

These could include:

- better lighting
- more storage facilities
- cable tidies
- better ventilation to reduce condensation
- repairing leaks
- installing splash guards and using lids on pans
- non-slip flooring
- suitable cleaning materials and methods
- cleaning up spills with a dry method, and
- maintaining and cleaning outside steps and pathways.

Non-slip shoes should only be used as a solution once all other reasonable methods have been taken – that's the law. And they should be provided free. That's also the law!

Can you think of any other appropriate steps that could be taken?

What next?

If you believe that your employer isn't taking this issue seriously or doing enough, speak to your UNISON safety rep. UNISON has produced further guidance for safety reps with checklists and advice on what should be done for STFs and also falls from height.

If you believe that your employer blames you or others for STFs rather than taking steps to prevent or reduce the chance of these happening, have a look at our pamphlets for members on risk assessment and behavioural safety.

When it comes to health and safety, UNISON's message to employers is "Don't harm us, don't blame us, work with us!"

Further information

UNISON health and safety knowledge page
unison.org.uk/safety

UNISON online catalogue
unison.org.uk/catalogue

Are you at risk? – booklet for members explaining risk assessment
Stock no. 2720

Behavioural safety, UNISON booklet for members
Stock no. 3690

Slips, Trips, and Falls, UNISON booklet for members
Stock no. 2450

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