UNISON HEALTH & SAFETY Information sheet

• *Slips, Trips and Falls* *Last updated in January 2017*

Slips, trips and falls (STFs) are often seen as a joke, but they are no laughing matter. They occur all too frequently and can cause some very serious injuries.

A COMMON HAZARD

STFs (on the same level) make up 43% of all the serious injuries to workers reported to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and 23% of over-seven-day injuries (where an employee is off work or cannot do their usual job for more than seven days). They are by far the most common cause of injury at work. STF's cause one or two deaths per year and can lead to other types of injury. Forty-six percent of UNISON safety reps identified STFs as one of their top five work hazards of concern in response to the TUC safety rep survey of 2016.

SIGNIFICANT CONSEQUENCES NOT ALWAYS APPRECIATED

Falls from Height

Far more people die (37-45 each year) from falls from a height (e.g. from a ladder, scaffolding, or down to a lower level, etc.) but fewer individuals suffer this type of incident (accounting for 16% of serious injuries, and 6% of over-seven-day injuries). However, slips and trips account for a significant percentage of falls from height. As a fall from height is likely to cause serious injury or death, ensuring that slips and trips do not occur is much more important. UNISON has separate guidance on working at height (see below).

An Ageing Population

The consequences of a STF injury can be far greater for older or vulnerable individuals – see the section below about STFs concerning patients in the healthcare sector. More generally, the working population is ageing and is predicted to continue to age. More people of pension age are also expected to seek work as the value of pensions remains low or decreases. A STF injury on an older worker can be far more serious and may require a greater recovery time, although overall older workers are no less likely to have time off for injury or ill health than their younger counterparts.

Catering

Catering is a high-risk area for STFs. Leaks and spills, poorly placed items, floors in poor condition, or ineffective or inadequate cleaning lead to STFs being the major cause of workplace incidents in catering. With sharp tools in use, hard surfaces, and plenty of hot liquids and surfaces; the consequence of a STF can be far greater than usual.

Some incidents have seen staff put their arm/s out to steady themselves and place their hand or arm onto a hot surface or into an open fryer causing serious burns (see the case study below). One mother of two died when she slipped or tripped on the kitchen floor of the residential care home where she worked. A large knife which she was carrying severed an artery in her neck. In another incident reported to the HSE, an employee slipped on custard in a school canteen just as the clearing away and cleaning operations had begun. She broke her leg and died from a blood clot a week later.

It is therefore vital to stop the floor becoming contaminated by preventing leaks and spills in the first place, and effectively cleaning them up as soon as they do occur.

Office Environments and Education

A slip or trip within an office environment can lead to a far more serious injury or death if, for example, you fall against a corner of a desk or down some steps or stairs. Within the education sector, structured timetables see large volumes of staff and pupils or students move around at the same time increasing the potential for slip and trip incidents. A large volume of people crowded into any space will make it harder to spot and avoid STF hazards, and make the consequence of a fall potentially far greater – especially during for example, any emergency evacuation.

Healthcare

STFs are the main cause of accidents to workers and patients in the healthcare sector, accounting for around 50% of serious injuries to employees. Vulnerable/older patients are especially at risk where a simple STF injury such as a broken bone can lead to complications such as thrombosis (blood clots) or embolisms (blood vessels becoming blocked) both of which may be fatal.

UNISON member Alison Hockaday worked as an occupational therapy assistant. Her first injury at work happened when she slipped on wet leaves on the entrance steps to the hospital, badly twisting her knee. Four years later she slipped on a wet vinyl floor, fracturing her right ankle. Alison suffered continued and considerable pain and disability in both her knee and ankle, requiring numerous operations and eventually leading to a below knee amputation. She can only wear her artificial limb for short periods so uses a wheelchair. Her employment was terminated on ill-health grounds whilst in her 20's, and whilst compensated, she can no-longer take part in the sports she used to regularly enjoy.

Cleaners

The process of cleaning can create slip and trip hazards, especially for those entering the area being cleaned or doing this work. It is therefore important to ensure employers establish good management systems that identify problems areas, decide what to do, act on decisions made, and check that the steps have been effective. Effective training and supervision is essential to ensure cleaning is undertaken safely and to the correct standard. The use of the wrong product on specially treated non-slip floors can damage or reduce the effectiveness of this treatment, making the floor no longer non-slip.

A COMBINATION OF FACTORS

Most slips occur in wet or contaminated conditions, and most trips are due to poor housekeeping or maintenance. However, 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.

Case Study – better management of health and safety required

A 16 year old girl slipped on water leaking from an ice-making machine and instinctively put out her hand to break her fall. Her hand and forearm went into a deep fat fryer and she sustained severe burns.

A shortage of staff on the day meant that rather than doing their usual job which included monitoring safety, the supervisor was covering someone else's work. Despite a policy to mop up spills it was common practice at busy times to just cover them with cardboard, in itself a trip hazard. The faulty equipment had leaked for several days despite various attempts to repair it. No-one had sole responsibility to co-ordinate the repair and a lack of communication between different shift managers had left the equipment leaking over a long period of time.

THE SOLUTION

The solution to preventing STFs is often simple and cost effective. A suitable risk assessment should identify:

- the slip and trip hazards (see checklist below);
- those who may be harmed paying particular attention to those more at risk – the young, the elderly, the infirm, those with a disability, pregnant women, or those who may be carrying items;
- the risk (the likelihood of a slip or trip); and then
- the necessary measures to prevent or control (minimise - where prevention is not possible) the risk of slipping or tripping.

As with all risk assessments, it should be recorded and reviewed periodically and when there has been any significant change.

Research has established that on average, there will be about 40 cases of a slip or stumble resulting in either no injury or only a minor one for every major injury which occurs. So staff and visitors should be encouraged to record all slips and trip incidents which employers should then consider and assess, no matter how minor or whether a near-miss. These may just be warning of a more serious incident to come.

Within catering, positive management within particular workplaces has been seen to successfully reduce injuries by over 66%.

STEPS TO PREVENT OR MINIMISE THE RISK OF STFS

These could include:

- preventing the floor from becoming wet or contaminated;
- changing the design of the workplace or the method of work;
- providing adequate lighting;
- avoiding overcrowding;
- providing adequate storage facilities;
- planning pedestrian and traffic routes;
- providing adequate ventilation to avoid the build-up of condensation;
- maintaining equipment and the work environment to prevent leaks, etc;
- using splash guards;
- laying appropriate non-slip flooring - avoiding very smooth floors where wet and contaminated surfaces are inevitable, such as in kitchens and entrances (note that floors can be sufficiently rough to avoid/reduce slipping incidents and still meet food hygiene requirements);
- replacing worn floor coverings - good quality coverings may last longer and thereby be cheaper in the long run;
- using appropriate non-slip mats where wet floors are inevitable - whilst ensuring that they don't cause a trip hazard;
- ensuring that only suitable cleaning materials and methods are used on any slip-resistant floors;
- managing spills effectively and ensuring good cleaning regimes;
- cleaning up spills with a dry method where possible since wet mopping and drying with a mop still leaves a floor wet and slippery;
- where wet floor cleaning is necessary, cleaning the floor outside normal working hours or thoroughly drying it immediately;
- effective housekeeping - is there enough storage space to stop the floor from becoming cluttered, are cables routed safely away from walkways or are cable management systems used;
- maintaining and cleaning outside steps and pathways, etc;
- training and supervising staff and contractors so that they understand the importance of the preventative measures; and
- (as a last resort) providing staff with suitable non-slip footwear free of charge.

Note that this list is not exhaustive. Can you think of any other appropriate steps that should be taken? Also, have a look at the safety rep inspection checklist at the end of this information sheet.

Case Study - better management of health and safety required (continued) and cost effective

Following the 16 year old girl's accident described above, the employer completely reviewed its management of wet and contaminated floors. As a result the following happened:

- slip control was given priority over serving customers - employees were empowered by the employer to clean up spills first,
- systems were put in place to ensure prompt repair of faulty equipment,
- managers were identified as being responsible for ensuring that slips procedures were implemented and followed, and
- extra training on slips procedures was given to all staff.

However, these steps were only taken after a serious injury had been suffered and the employer had been convicted and fined £15,000. They simply had to carry out a suitable and sufficient risk

assessment and put in place a safe system of work. Alison Hockaday's injuries (see the section on healthcare above) cost her employer £600,000 in compensation alone.

SAFETY REP SLIP AND TRIP HAZARDS INSPECTION CHECKLIST

- Is the floor contaminated (wet or dry e.g. dust, powder, or solid items such as plastic wallets)?
- Are all possible steps taken to avoid contamination - splash guards, lids and covers, leaks promptly repaired, spills immediately cleaned up, good house-keeping, etc?
- Are anti-slip mats provided in wet floor areas? Do they present a trip hazard in themselves? Do they work?
- Is there adequate drainage in wet floor areas, with grilled and not open gulleys and drains?
- Are appropriate protective footwear given free to staff, such as non-slip or with appropriate tread according to the hazard (for outdoor or indoor use with wet floors, snow, ice, or loose ground such as powders, etc)?
- Are adequate cleaning procedures in place - for the type of floor, the use it's put to, and the type of any spill (for example, suitable cleaning agents for greasy spills, or non-slip floors, etc)?
- Is wet cleaning avoided/dry cleaning used where possible?
- Where wet cleaning is necessary, does it take place outside of normal working hours, and are warning signs and pedestrian bypass routes used?
- Are doormats provided where moving from wet to dry floor surfaces?
- Are any rugs or mats securely fixed or with non-slip backings, and without curled up edges?
- Are there trailing cables? Can they be re-routed away from pathways, secured, and/or placed inside cable covers?
- Are items stored on the floor/under or near desks, etc?
- Is there adequate storage facilities?
- Is a goods in/out/stock control system required?
- Is overcrowding the problem?
- Are pedestrian routes needed to deal with the volume of people moving at the same time?
- Is rubbish regularly cleared and not allowed to build up?
- Is there adequate lighting?
- Is the floor or floor covering in a good state of repair (no cracks, loose material, holes, tears, or raised or curled up parts)?
- Is the floor level and even (no dips or unexpected slopes)?
- Are changes in floor levels avoided where possible, and where not indicated with highly visible tread nosings (i.e. white/reflective strips on the edge of any step) or appropriate markings on slopes?
- Are hand rails provided on slopes, stairs, and steps?
- Are staff given training on the precautions to be taken to avoid slip and trip hazards?
- Are contractors adequately instructed and supervised to ensure that they do not create slip and trip hazards?
- Are outside pathways and steps, etc. adequately maintained and cleaned? Are they flat, secure, without potholes, and cleaned of leaves, moss and algae?
- Do outside pathways and steps, etc. have appropriate lighting, markings, and hand rails on steps/slopes, etc.

Note that this list is not exhaustive. Can you think of any other slip or trip hazards in your workplace?

Case Study – what is a suitable floor surface?

Ellis was a carer at a home for the elderly and slipped on some urine in the main corridor. The floor surface was smooth vinyl, becoming slippery when wet with pools of urine. Most of the residents were incontinent. The employer was aware of the slip risk. Numerous previous incidents led to a cleaning and inspection system (if urine was found on the floor staff were to clean it up or call for a cleaner), warning notices, and two non-slip mats being placed in the worst hit areas.

In Ellis vs Bristol City Council, the court decided that a floor was not suitable for purpose (as required by regulation 12 of the Workplace Health, Safety, and Welfare Regulations) because although only temporary, spillages which made the floor slippery were also frequent and regular. Whether the floor was suitable depended on the circumstances of its use. So the test was not simply whether the floor was kept free of slip and trip hazards so far as reasonably practicable (see below *), to be suitable it had to adequately cope with regularly and frequently occurring hazards (urine here, but also possibly the water around the sides of a swimming pool for example).

The court stated that in this case a number of factors had to be considered, including: the construction of the floor, the nature or quality of its surface, the frequency of the hazardous condition, the likelihood of an accident occurring, and the possible seriousness of any injury that might occur. It also stated that employers should not assume that a worker would always be able to concentrate on the possible presence of a hazard such as this, and that evidence identified that the colour of the floor had made it difficult to see the pools of urine. The court referred to the accompanying code of practice to these regulations which states that: "Surfaces of floors which are likely to get wet or be subject to spillages should be of a type which does not become unduly slippery. A slip resistant coating should be applied where necessary. Floors near to machinery which would cause injury if anyone were to fall against it should be slip resistant and be kept free from slippery substances or loose materials. Where a leak, spillage or other type of contamination occurs and is likely to be a slipping hazard, take immediate steps to fence it off, clean it up, or cover it with something to stop it being slippery (e.g. absorbent granules)."

FURTHER INFORMATION

* Reasonably practicable means that where there is a risk of harm which cannot be prevented or avoided, then employers are expected to take "reasonably practicable" steps (appropriate action) to control or minimise the risks. Put simply, the more likely it is that harm will occur, and the more serious that harm could be, the more the employer is expected to do.

UNISON Height at Work Information Sheet - https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2013/10/PoliciesWorking-at-Height-Information-Sheet3.pdf

The HSE's website has a large amount of further information on slips, trips and falls (including various tools for employers to use in managing slip hazards) at: http://www.hse.gov.uk/slips/index.htm and falls from height at: http://www.hse.gov.uk/work-at-height/index.htm