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Minimize the Risk Addressing Slip-

and-Fall Accidents BY ROBERT KRAVITZ

Not only do slip-and-fall accidents cause injury, any facility manager can tell you they also cost money. Workers' compensation insurance costs escalate when the number of slip-and-fall accidents at a facility increase.

And injured workers must take time off from work to recuperate, requiring other workers to put in overtime to compensate or requiring the company to hire and train new workers to fill in.

An English study conducted in 2002 that pinpointed problems that contribute to slips and falls in food-processing facilities, also found similar problems at many other types of industrial plants as well.

The study concluded that the following were some of the major influences that result in industrial slip-and-fall accidents:

- Products falling on the floor: Often in a factory setting, products or materials fall on the floor. While some spillage may

be inevitable, if it is excessive, an engineering solution may be necessary to remedy the problem.

- Surface buildup: Grease, water, ice, metal shavings, dust and other debris make floors slippery and potentially hazardous.

- Soiled footwear: Many slips and falls are not the result of factory floors at all but are caused by oil, debris and other contaminants building up on workers' shoes.

- Inadequate cleaning: Many industrial and factory floors are poorly maintained because of inadequate training of custodial workers, and/or the workers do not have the proper floorcare equipment necessary to maintain the floors.

Slips happen, and even with the best of precautions and safety measures in place, they will probably never be eradicated completely in industrial settings. And although there are a variety of factors beyond those listed here that can result in slips and falls, there are steps management can incorporate to minimize these accidents.

Some of these involve educating workers to help them protect themselves from injuries. Others include incorporating preventive measures such as proper matting systems, selecting the proper floorcare equipment to maintain industrial floors, and applying coatings or finishes that can help minimize these accidents.

"Management must understand what causes slips and falls, and then take the proper steps to minimize them," said Robert Allen, Ph.D., vice president of operations with Amano Pioneer Eclipse, an equipment and product manufacturer from Sparta, NC. "They have to provide the proper equipment, cleaning products and training, and ensure they're actually doing the job."

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Educating Workers

“One of the best ways to prevent slips and falls is through education,” agrees Kyle McCabe, a floorcare equipment engineer with Tornado, a manufacturer of professional cleaning equipment. “This involves meeting with factory workers to discuss the slip and fall problem, which not only helps make them more aware of the risks in the workplace, but instructs them on measures they can take to help reduce them.”

According to McCabe, one of the first steps involves training workers to spot and report any potential hazards to facility management. The study mentioned earlier found that some workers—in their haste to keep up with or complete their duties—will often “work around” a potential hazard. “This increases the likelihood that they or someone else may have an accident,” he says.

Often these educational meetings lead to the formation of a floor-safety committee made up of management and workers. From here, the team often develops a program of ongoing inspections of the plant to correct potential problems and prevent accidents.

McCabe advises that workers should also be taught to take the following steps to help protect themselves from slips and falls while working:

- Wear adequate, nonskid footwear at work;
- Keep shoes clean and soil free;
- Do not rush through work, and allow adequate time to complete duties;
- Properly use stepladders to avoid stretching or leaning to reach items;
- Recognize that weather plays a major role in slips and falls; be more careful walking when it is raining or snowing outside; and
- Be on alert for potential hazards and mind immediate surroundings.

Preventive Measures

“Matting systems are essential in an industrial facility,” says McCabe. “They keep outdoor soils, water, oil and other contaminants out of the facility. Inside the facility, they can help prevent slips and falls, but be aware that they can also be the cause of an accident.”

This is because many times, standalone matting systems inside a factory setting are not adequately secured to the floor. In time, they may lose their anchoring or corners and ends become curled, and people can trip on them. Additionally, they may become soiled or may not be the correct mat for the selected floor area.

When selecting a matting system, first determine if the mats will be placed in a wet or dry environment and the amount of foot traffic in the area. High-quality mats with a textured solid top provide excellent traction in a dry setting and usually can hold up well in heavily trafficked areas. Dust and soils stay on the surface so that they can be easily vacuumed up.

Similar matting systems with a Z-web design allow water, oil, and larger debris to fall through, helping to keep the surface dry, preventing slips and falls.

To provide extra traction, use slip-resistant tapes to secure the mat to the floor area. And do not forget to vacuum, clean, and replace the mats as necessary. A proper matting system can be a key measure to prevent slips and falls. But when mats are soiled or at the end of their useful life, they can actually be a major cause of accidents.

Floorcare Equipment for Factory Settings

Most industrial and factory floors must be cleaned and maintained on a daily basis — swept, damp mopped, etc. — and scrubbed and deep cleaned regularly depending on the setting, degree of soiling, workload, products manufactured, climate, and other factors. “When it comes to selecting floor machines, the first issue to be addressed is the size of the equipment,” explains McCabe. “Industrial facilities are often large, requiring larger machines to maintain them.”

These machines also help increase worker productivity and help cut labor costs dramatically. He adds that larger equipment, such as ride-on floor machines, can also multitask—scrubbing, cleaning, and polishing the floor all in the same process— which contributes to cost savings.

Often, industrial facilities have concrete or vinyl composition tile (VCT) floors that are selected because they can handle heavy foot traffic and hold up to wear and tear. “But these floors are porous,” Mc-Cabe says. “Even if they are well sealed, the sealant breaks down over time, and soils can penetrate the floor.”

Ongoing proper training of all cleaning professionals and their supervisors is essential in making sure industrial floors are cleaned thoroughly and efficiently. “Not only does the training help prevent slips and falls, it eliminates bad habits that often find their way into floorcare,” says McCabe. “And the training provides other benefits as well. It boosts professionalism, keeps work mentally challenging, and enhances morale.” □

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