

Slips and trips

Contamination

Introduction

The risk of slipping, if both footwear and the floor being walked on are clean and dry, is very small. The presence of a contaminant (such as water, oil, or dust) can transform a low risk environment into a highly dangerous one; even very small amounts of contamination can cause this change.

It is important to understand the risk posed by contamination and to take steps to prevent it getting on floors or take measures to control the risk of slips on contaminated flooring.

What is surface contamination?

A contaminant is anything that can act as a lubricant between the floor surface and a pedestrian's foot or footwear. The most common workplace contaminants are water or water-based contaminants, but oils, grease and even dry contaminants can make a floor slippery. Contamination can come from a wide range of sources. Some will be outside of any control, such as rain, whereas others which are associated with a business's processes, may be easier to control.

Examples of contaminants include:

- > Water – Rain water, spilled drinks.
- > Oily/greasy – Cooking oil, food spills, machinery leaks.
- > Dry – Dust, sawdust, granules.

Not all floors will be slippery when contaminated. There is a wide range of flooring available which is not slippery when wet. Shiny smooth floors tend to be slippery when wet and floors will need to be rougher to cope with water-based contamination. Floors will need to be rougher still to cope with oil and grease. Flooring is available which is not slippery even when contaminated with cooking oil.

Identify the contaminants in your workplace

It is important to identify the contaminants that are likely to be present in the workplace, understand where they come from, consider their influence on slip risk and implement a strategy to deal with the risk. Take a few minutes to watch what happens in the workplace and identify what sources of contamination exist. How does it get on the floor?

Wherever practicable try to prevent the contamination getting onto the floor in the first place. However, in some environments (e.g. public areas or production areas) this can be incredibly difficult, so be realistic. If keeping the floor clean at all times is not going to be feasible, think about what else can be done to keep the area safe.

Prevent contamination getting on the floor

The best control for preventing slips is to prevent contamination getting on to potentially slippery surfaces.

A well-designed entrance, incorporating effective drainage, canopies and matting can help to keep external contaminants at bay. Advice about designing entrances is provided in Risk Essentials - Entrances.

Slips and trips - Contamination

Contaminants associated with a business can sometimes be eliminated by using effective containment. Try to enclose dirty processes as much as possible to prevent contamination falling onto the floor. If this is not feasible, consider using a secondary containment system to prevent the spread of contamination across the floor and onto walkways. If contaminants are airborne, or otherwise difficult to contain, consider segregating the dirty processes by placing them in a separate room with suitable entrances to prevent the contamination spreading into clean areas.

It is also worth thinking about the workflow, as this can also help to minimize the spread of contamination and keep it off busy walkways.

Ask the following questions:

- > Can dirty processes be contained or segregated (for example, limiting food preparation to the kitchen area)?
- > Can dripping items be moved around in sealed containers to prevent contamination falling onto the floor (for example, using cups with lids)?
- > Can the distance that dirty items are transported be minimized?
- > Could dirty items be moved via a different route to avoid contaminating walkways?

Any preventative measures should save time and money, through less waste, less cleaning and fewer falls.

What to do if you can't keep contamination off the floor?

If you can't prevent contamination getting onto the floor, think about how to mitigate the risks. Where contamination cannot be prevented getting on the floor, specifying an appropriate floor finish can help prevent slips. Further advice about selecting suitable floor surfaces is provided in Risk Essentials – Choosing Slip Resistant Flooring.

Even slip resistant flooring can lose its performance if contamination is allowed to build up on the surface. It is therefore very important to remove floor surface contamination regularly by implementing a suitable cleaning regime.

Think carefully about how and when to undertake cleaning to ensure it effectively removes the contamination and doesn't introduce further risk. Advice about cleaning is provided in Risk Essentials – Cleaning Regimes.

Suitable footwear can provide protection against slip accidents where contamination cannot be prevented from getting on the floor. Advice on selecting appropriate footwear is available in Risk Essentials – Footwear. It should be noted that contaminated footwear can spread contamination into clean areas, increasing the slip risk. Providing boot wash stations at relevant points can help to reduce the spread of contaminants on footwear.

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