

Look at me — I'm still standing!

Deb Severin, FH

It can happen when you're walking in the parking lot and your foot lands on a small rock or slips on a wet surface. It can happen when you're not watching where you're going, when walking on something you shouldn't be walking on, when you step up from the curb, or when you trip while carrying something.

Most of us are very experienced walkers — after all, we've been walking almost all our lives. It's become second nature. So why is it that simply putting one foot in front of the other results in so many injuries?

Most slips and falls have little to do with the work surface or the type of shoes we wear, but have everything to do with where our mental focus is at the moment of injury. Even with a task as commonplace as walking, we must stay externally focused and aware of our surroundings.

Slips, trips and falls are major causes of injuries, both at work and away from work. The major causes of falls are slipping and tripping over an obstacle. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, slips and trips cause 15 percent of all accidental deaths and 10 percent of all injuries.

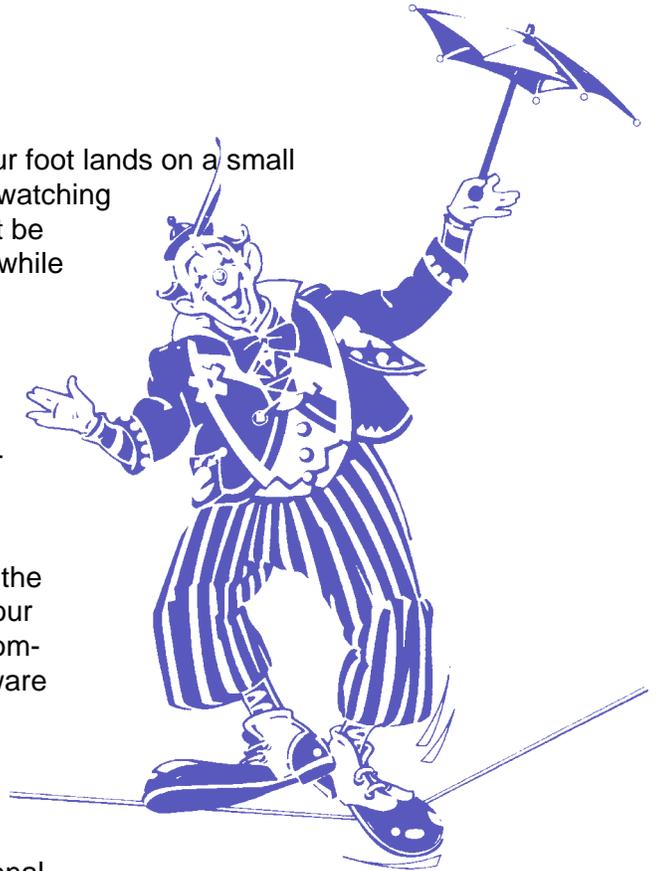
Because slips and falls are so common, they are often dismissed as unpredictable accidents visited upon clumsy people. These attitudes need to be changed. The right attitude means looking out for unsafe practices and conditions. Slips, trips and falls are among the easiest accidents to isolate and prevent.

We all recognize that the winter months are especially hazardous because of snow and ice, but there are many other factors that contribute to slips, trips and falls. For instance:

- Loose, irregular surfaces such as gravel, shifting floor tiles and uneven sidewalks
- Oil, grease and other liquids
- Stairs — especially those that are taller, shorter, have small tread depth or are otherwise irregular
- Obstructed aisles or walkways
- Insufficient light
- Shoes with slick soles, as well as platform shoes and high heels
- Moving too fast
- Carrying items that obstruct your vision or impair your balance
- Inattention and distraction.

Here are some tips on eliminating the hazards to walkers:

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Treat floors with respect

Whether they're wet from rain, melting snow, spilled coffee or a recent cleaning, floors pose a big threat. Try not to track snow into buildings. Recently cleaned wet surfaces should be clearly marked, and remember that dry floors can also be dangerous.

Move deliberately

On slick surfaces, take short steps and put your feet down flat or move them forward without lifting them from the ground. Proceed slowly and take short steps with your toes pointed slightly out. Adjust your walking speed and style to the surface you're traveling on. Do not carry awkward loads. Keep at least one hand free to maintain balance. Take your time, pay attention to where you're going and make wide turns at corners.

Clear the clutter

Is furniture protruding into walkways? Are walkways used as storage areas for miscellaneous junk or as pathways for wires and phone lines? A few minutes' worth of straightening up and clearing the floor can spare weeks of waiting for an injury to heal.

Wear sensible shoes

Wear the right shoes or boots — ones with flat heels that provide good traction. High heels, sandals that don't hold our feet tightly and shoes without proper treading are all hazards. Bring your nice shoes in a bag and put them on after you get safely inside.

Take care of walkways

If you notice an icy walkway, porch or step, sprinkle some de-icing compound or salt on it. Containers of this material can be found inside or outside of most Hanford building entrances. These are for everyone to use.

Go the extra distance

Remember, simply knowing about a hazard is not enough. It needs to be cleaned up, fixed up or disposed of. Saying "Someone else can take care of that" may result in an entirely preventable fall.

At work, follow proper procedures to handle risks. At home, help your neighbor by sprinkling salt or an ice-melting product on that icy sidewalk. You'll be spreading good will as well, and perhaps preventing a nasty fall. ♦