

Safety Share 1.18.11 Slips, Trips and Falls

It's January and according to modern weather data, this is the coldest month of the year. Named after Janus, the Roman god of gates, doors, doorways, beginnings, endings and time, it's no wonder January, which begins the new year, was named as such. And because of its extreme cold weather, we must protect ourselves from the dangers of hypothermic conditions. This means dressing warmly: using layers of clothing is advisable. Also, protecting the body extremities is important as the greatest loss of body heat occurs through the feet, hands and head. It is also a time for everyone to be cognizant of ice and snow...especially ice. If we are not careful, one misplaced step can result in a serious injury. This means is that we now have additional hazards when we are performing our normal field work. Not only do we have the hazards inherent with our assigned job tasks; be it pinch points and crushing hazards from heavy equipment operations, or fall hazards from working near excavations or elevated surfaces, we now must be very careful to note slippery surfaces. Indeed, all these hazards are now exacerbated or intensified because of slippery conditions. It would be worthwhile to conduct a two-minute drill before we begin our work and identify potential slippery surfaces so that these areas can be either isolated (when feasible) or demarcated so personnel will be aware of these hazardous conditions. Every year more than 200,000 employees across the nation are injured when they slip, trip, or fall from work surfaces such as floors, platforms, portable and fixed ladders, stairs, and ramps. Recently, more than 600 workers were killed in job related falls in one year. While all cases may not be attributed to slippery surfaces (or indeed ice in the winter months), OSHA has recognized a need to revise workplace standards. Most notably is Subpart D of 29 CFR 1910; "Walking and Working Surfaces." OSHA, through their assessment of historical data, acknowledges that these accidents happen because employees are either unprotected from slip, trip, and fall hazards, unaware of the hazards or they have a protection but aren't using it correctly. For instance, there have been numerous fatalities when workers have fallen from heights even though they were wearing full body harnesses: Unfortunately they weren't tied off. Key proposed changes include:

- Eliminate duplication and extensive specification of requirements, while emphasizing performance-based criteria. For example, the proposal would incorporate the construction scaffolding standards, which would eliminate the need for most scaffold specifications in general industry.
- A new section would be added to subpart I (Personal Protective Equipment) that provides criteria for fall protection equipment. This new section would make the general industry standards consistent with existing construction and maritime standards regulating fall protection, as well as current industry practice, and give clear standards on fall protection PPE to employers.

- Compliance flexibility would be provided for the mitigation of fall hazards. For example, proposed subpart D would require fall protection, but would provide options for compliance such as travel restraint systems and designated areas for fall protection when appropriate.
- Subpart I would provide criteria on the proper use of personal fall protection systems when used by the employer.

When compared to the actual incidents related to slips, trips and falls (see the statistics above), OSHA's actions seem to only scratch the surface. This is because many things can only be controlled by the individual workers. This is the main premise of Human Performance Improvement: we, as humans are fallible and that no matter well a regulation or procedure may be written, it will ALWAYS be up to the individual to take note of their work conditions and to recognize the hazards associated with their work tasks. Once the hazards are recognized appropriate controls need to be implemented. And using these controls to ensure their effectiveness, is in the hands of those that that have the ability to assert them; that is, the individual worker.