



Health & Safety **MATTERS**

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Get a Grip on Slips and Trips

Introduction

Falls due to slips and trips continue to be a significant cause of injury at work. Recent statistics from 2013 show that 37% of reported injuries to employees were due to a slip, trip or a fall from height and 31% of over seven day injuries under the new RIDDOR reporting timescale were down to the same causes. The estimated number of working days lost in the UK is over 2 million with many of these being major injuries to workers.

What can be done to reduce this?

Slips and trips are often categorised as being the fault of “careless” workers, not looking where they are going or not avoiding obstacles in the workplace. However while it is always easy to blame the workers - and in some cases have a laugh at someone falling over - the real cause of the accident may well be due to something as simple as inappropriate footwear. In many industries risk assessments do not appear to take account of slips and trips. Whether this is down to incompetence in carrying out the assessment, or deliberately excluding this aspect (as it might result in identifying the correct personal protective equipment in this case footwear), with the accompanying cost to the employer, is anyone’s guess.

Why is footwear classed as PPE?

Footwear can be classed as PPE as it can provide effective control in the prevention of slips when used alongside other practical measures. In getting all scientific for a minute:

“...pedestrian slip resistance is determined by the Coefficient of Friction (CoF) between two interacting surfaces, specifically the frictional properties or slipperiness of floors and footwear in actual conditions during locomotion.”

In layperson’s terms this means that the slipperiness of the floor and the sole of the shoe, when walking, are a greater determinant of an accident than anything else. Friction is considered to be a direct indicator of slip risk. The European PPE directive recognises the need for slip resistance as a protective property of footwear, which is often demonstrated through mechanical tests.

GMB SAFETY REPS

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Are these mechanical tests accepted by everyone?

The most common test which forms the basis of a number of British Standards has raised concerns that it does not reflect the actual friction requirements of normal walking activities, due to its' inability to predict slip potential. The Health and Safety Laboratory (HSL) which carries out research work for the HSE, have used a ramp test to investigate the slip resistant properties of footwear. This footwear slip resistance ratings scheme is called the 'Grip Scheme'.

What is the Grip Scheme?

The Grip Scheme is designed to allow footwear users to identify suitable slip resistant footwear as a control measure to reduce the risk of slipping accidents. The scheme is managed by HSL and only deals with the slip resistance of the footwear and not other aspects from a competent risk assessment, such as toe protection on boots. The footwear is tested on a ramp which is an adjustable platform with the operator in a harness to prevent a fall from the platform. The operator walks at a speed of 144 steps per minute with the angle of the platform raised by 1 inch every time a walk is completed without incident. After repeating a number of times, and being observed during the operation the test results generate a rating for the sole of the footwear. These should be re-evaluated on an annual basis.

What are the results designed to achieve?

Manufacturers submit footwear to the HSL so as to get a slip rating for their boots/shoes which can be factored into the design and development of new workplace footwear. This can also help buyers at the point of sale to choose the right level of slip resistance for their employees. This will obviously reduce accidents and the cost to both the worker and the employer in terms of money, time and pain and suffering. If employers were to follow the ratings system this would give a competitive advantage to those producers who had slip resistant rated footwear.

Conclusion

Many of us take footwear for granted and do not necessarily think that what we wear could have consequences for our health and safety at work. However if a government agency, the HSL, are prepared to put research time and resources into this then there are obviously problems associated with slips and trips. As mentioned the failure to consider footwear issues when carrying out a risk assessment can result in many GMB members not being properly protected at work. GMB has many members in the catering and caring professions who often wear their own everyday shoes to work with no thought on the suitability of the soles for the working environment. There may be other members who do wear shoes with good soles on them but they might not be of sufficient slip resistance. It is important when considering the work environment in the work place to consider both the floor and the footwear used. For more information on this or any other health & safety issue please contact craig.stuart@gmb.org.uk

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