

Integrating Employee Fall Prevention Techniques in Healthcare Operations

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Introduction

How many of us have fallen at some point in our lives? How many have fallen twice or even more times? Do we write it off as just being clumsy or that we just weren't paying attention? How many of these falls have occurred at work? For many businesses, these falls are very costly loss drivers that could have been prevented. The following information provides a review of controls successfully incorporated by healthcare facilities to prevent slips and falls.

The Problem

The human machine is very efficient. When you walk your foot "skims" over the walking surface just enough to clear it. We all have our own individual gait pattern – we walk our own walk. Look at the bottom of your shoe – how is it wearing? Are you a heel dragger or a side roller? Now think about what happens when you combine your gait style on a contaminated floor. When a contaminant disrupts the interface between the shoe tread and the walking surface, the friction is interrupted and a slip can occur.

Many healthcare communities are faced with the challenge of dealing with slips, trips and falls as a main loss driver. Millions of steps are taken on site every year. It may seem to some that this exposure is just part of the business. Taking a methodical approach to reducing the likelihood of slips and falls can go a long way in impacting an organization's losses.

Most safety professionals already know some key techniques to prevent slips and falls in healthcare facilities. The challenge is making these techniques integral to the day-to-day operations and safe practices of the facility. Identifying the problem can be as easy as looking at loss trends and accident reports. Evaluating the exposure is a little more challenging, requiring the determination of the likelihood that a loss will occur; and if the loss occurs, the severity of the outcome. This evaluation may require the involvement of various personnel in the organization. The most challenging part of this process is identifying the control technique and integrating it successfully to control the exposure.

Solutions

The steps you can take to address slips and falls may be a lot easier to incorporate than the steps to address other loss drivers such as strains/sprains and injuries incurred while dealing with difficult behaviors.

Engineering ensures the walking surface does not contribute to slips and falls. Taking this concept a little further, good engineering controls insure walking surfaces are specifically designed and maintained to prevent slips and falls in spite of environmental conditions. In many cases, engineering has the most feasible long-term impact and can help control other exposures to the organization, such as patient/resident and visitor falls. It is fortunate if a floor can be selected that provides a good walking surface designed for the expected exposures during the design stage of construction; i.e., a kitchen floor should have properties to prevent falls due to contaminants on the floor and should be easily cleaned. Consideration of the surface coefficient of friction, durability, appearance and ease of cleaning must be made whether the floor will be part of a new construction project or a renovation. Prior to selection, it would even be advisable to visit a facility that has had the particular flooring in place for several years to determine if the marketing information is valid. Unfortunately in many situations, the floor is already in place and ends up being identified as a “problem.” A higher incidence of falls may occur in this area. It may be a challenge due to the cost of replacing the floor surface.

Administrative controls consist of floor treatments and cleaning practices. The goal should not be only to clean and dry, but also to maintain the slip resistant characteristics. Procedures need to consider that everyone exposed to the floor maintenance process must be held accountable to do their part. Housekeeping employees must be held to high quality standards to perform the floor maintenance tasks. This includes the cleaning process, the drying process and the warning process. Many of us have watched employees and visitors walk right around a wet floor sign. Recently a facility I work with had an employee injure himself when he tripped over a wet floor sign he was attempting to walk around. Housekeeping employees are not likely to mop properly if the process does not take into consideration mop buckets and wringers. Many new products such as microfiber cleaning products, mop buckets with ergonomic improvements, cordless floor dryers, and high visibility floor signs are being well received by housekeeping departments. An example of how one of these new products made an impact in reducing falls, while positively improving other aspects of the operations, is the use of newly designed mop buckets. A simple improvement of adding a spigot to the bucket to prevent strain related injuries to staff who must pick up the 30 pound bucket to dump it into a slop sink has improved the floor cleaning process. Employees would use the water too long because they dreaded picking up the bucket. This reduced the effectiveness of the cleaning process. The spigot has allowed employees to more frequently change their water, removing more contaminants that may increase the likelihood of a slip on the floor.

There is a burden on management to ensure the process is effective. This can be accomplished by having a professional test the surface for an estimate of the coefficient of friction AND performing your own quality control activities. It is common for me to do testing and find the floors to be filthy (and therefore, a contaminated surface)!

Personal protective equipment (PPE), a last resort control, can also be helpful in preventing slips. PPE is generally considered as equipment or devices that protect a worker from hazards and harmful conditions (existing and potential). Considering slip resistant footwear as PPE (although not recognized as such by OSHA) can provide an easy control to reduce the likelihood of a slip.

Still, it should be cautioned that this creates many challenges. While it may be one of the lowest costing alternatives, it requires more supervisory time and monitoring than other alternatives. Some facilities opt to pay for the footwear, some pay a portion of the cost, even providing payroll deduction options, and some pay nothing, simply requiring it as part of the “uniform.” Obviously, there are pros and cons to each of these options and much of this depends on the culture of the organization. Some employees exposed to potentially slippery surfaces who never knew there was such a thing as “slip resistant” footwear will eagerly purchase the footwear, while still others are willing to entrench themselves in a battle to defend the particular type of footwear to which they are emotionally attached.

Implementation Strategies

I have seen several strategies put in place to address slips and falls, while taking the factors described previously into consideration. Some worked. Some did not. Success depended on two main factors: organizational culture and leadership buy-in. The organization’s culture will impact every aspect of the controls implemented. Leadership support of the control measures come from the proper culture. Those in charge should not view the steps implemented as punishment or a nuisance, but as a way to prevent team members from getting hurt.

The following strategy has been the most successful in my experience. It was adopted through trial and error over time. Some of it was learned from other organizations who had limited success. Putting all of these elements together made the program have the impact necessary to reduce the slips and falls in the organization.

- Revised the uniform policy to require employees to wear slip resistant footwear supplied by one particular supplier, purchased through payroll deduction. There was a rollout period where dining and food services were required first, then support staff and nursing. Policy then included everybody, except marketing and upper level management if involved in a “function.”
- Required compliance with the new policy by a specified date.
- Department heads were required to educate their staff and enforce the policy.
- Upper level management (V.P. and President) performed audits with safety committee representatives. Employees in violation of the policy were reprimanded per the disciplinary procedures. Individual coaching was provided by the upper level management.
- Floor surfaces were tested to identify problem areas.
- Housekeeping Manager obtained samples of various floor treatments. Best product was selected and incorporated into the floor treatment procedures.
- Other floor treatment issues addressed (floor drying, signage – wet floor signs with flashing red lights utilized and removed immediately after floor dried).
- Improved quality assurance efforts to insure floors were adequately cleaned.
- Purchasing department established guidelines for cleaning equipment and supplies (only accepting items approved by the safety committee for ergonomics and slip resistant properties).
- Facilities Manager educated to include slip resistant flooring considerations for future expansion and renovations.

- Human resources added oversight to accident investigations to verify slip resistant footwear was worn when any injuries occurred.
- Leadership reminded to check for shoe wear (without becoming the shoe police). The policy states “clothing must be in good condition and not appear to be excessively worn.” Shoes must be “secured” and not worn loosely.
- Safety committee reviews falls and discusses with their individual departments.

Conclusion

Reducing employee falls in healthcare operations can be accomplished through a well-thought-out approach. Representatives from each department should be educated, provided with the tools to make a positive impact and held accountable to implement the changes. Monitor the impact the corrective measures are having. Remember not to get caught up in the numbers. Focus on what the data tells you about the processes in place. By considering all of the factors that impact employee slips and falls, you can integrate controls into all facets of your operations to reduce slips and falls experienced by employees in your operations.