



Risktopics

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Tips for wintertime walking to avoid slips and falls

Introduction

It is the time of year when slips and falls can occur more frequently due to winter weather conditions. The following information provides sound advice for increasing your awareness of your surroundings when walking on wet or slippery sidewalks, walkways, parking lots, and building entrances.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2007, for all nonfatal occupational injuries, it was noted that floors, walkways, and ground surfaces were the source of injury or illness for 20 percent of all days-away-from-work cases. This represented an increase of 7 percent from 2006 for this same category.

The National Census of Fatal Occupational Statistics Summary Report for 2008 released on August 20, 2009 indicated that the number of fatal falls on the same level increased slightly in 2008.

Fatal workplace falls, which had risen to a series high in 2007, declined by 20 percent in 2008. 680 fatal falls occurred in 2008 compared to 847 fatal falls in 2007.

How to prevent slips and falls

It is important to always wear the proper footwear for the time of year. As the temperature drops and water on surfaces freeze, a good pair of winter boots with proper traction will be helpful. A boot with a non-slip tread sole which is warm and well insulated should have wide, low heels. For daily winter walking, it might be more helpful for the boot to be light in weight and waterproof, but if your walk to work requires trekking in deep snow, a heavier boot might be needed. Rainy conditions might require a light boot that is waterproof, less bulky yet stable and should be warm to prevent hypothermia. Shoes or boots with leather or plastic soles should be avoided on slippery, wet, and icy surfaces. Boots with good rubber treads or over-shoes with rubber treads are suggested for wintertime walking.

How do I walk safely on snow and ice?

- Always observe your surroundings. This applies when parking your car, walking to and from your car, as well as walking to and from work. Take note of walking distances and surface conditions before you park your car. If possible, plan your route and allow sufficient time to reach your destination.

- Do not hurry and jump out of your car. Swing both legs around and position yourself with both legs squarely in front of you with feet properly positioned on the ground (avoiding ice if possible). Support your arms by holding onto the vehicle, and then carefully stand up.
- Before you take a step, take a deep breath and relax. Bend and relax your knees, walk slowly, and take small steps to maintain your center of balance over your feet.
- Walk carefully, anticipate the possibility of falling, and never run or hurry on icy walkways. Walking slowly will help you to react quickly to a change in traction if needed.
- Keep your eyes focused on where you are going and plan your next steps and moves.
- To help your balance, keep your hands at your sides and not in your pockets.
- If handrails or railings are available, use them, but be sure to wear your gloves to help protect from the elements and assist with your gripping ability.
- Avoid carrying big or bulky items and try never to carry heavy boxes or items on stairways when in slippery, wet or icy conditions. If you need to carry items, try to keep one hand free to hold onto railings. Also, try to make sure your vision is not obstructed.

Other key points to remember

When transitioning from outside to inside during wet, icy, or snowy conditions, various walking surface changes are usually present. Snow removal or clearing of ice may or may not have been completed by the time you arrive at your destination and sometimes these areas may become icier over time. These conditions also continue to change as additional precipitation may occur, or the sun shines and the temperatures continue to vary. Do not assume that just because the snow has been cleared away that the surface is no longer slippery.

- Try to avoid taking shortcuts and walk in designated paths. Look for signs and note that sidewalk edges near grass may help with traction, but could also be hazardous if there is a drop-off at the edge. Be cautious of uphill and downhill sections and rest as needed.
- Snow melt de-icing products may be used, but they may not melt snow or ice as quickly depending on the temperature. The product can become little rocks on the surface of sidewalks and streets, which can aid in traction or possibly roll under your shoes. Be alert and focused. These products that melt the snow and ice could refreeze and become even more slippery depending on the temperature and conditions. Sand or other abrasives may be used or added to the treatments to help with traction. Surface streets may be treated with magnesium chloride or similar products and can be slippery when initially applied or over-applied. Be careful on these walking surfaces even when treated with anti-icing or de-icing products.
- Do not let your guard down when entering buildings as building entrances and floor surface changes can be a challenge. In wet conditions, floor mats can cause additional concerns as moisture may accumulate. Continue to walk slowly and carefully.
- Should you fall, try to relax and avoid extending your arms. Twist your body and try to roll to avoid hitting your face. If you are carrying items, try to toss them to avoid injury from the items.
- Shoe traction devices or ice grippers are available to wear over footwear for walking on ice or hard-packed snow. There are different brands and types and all are usually easy to wear. Be sure to be seated when putting these items on your shoes and when removing them. Continue to walk slowly and carefully while wearing these devices. Also note that these devices must be removed before transitioning off the snow to tile, linoleum or indoor floor surfaces since they can become very hazardous on smooth surfaces.
- In rainy conditions before entering a building, shake your umbrella outside to try to avoid allowing rain droplets that have collected on your umbrella to saturate the indoor entry floor surface. Try to reduce adding additional moisture on the floor mats and surfaces and increasing the potential for slips and falls to occur.
- When approaching crosswalks or crossing streets, be aware of approaching vehicles that may have lost traction and are sliding on the roadways toward you. Vehicles may not stop and you need to be observant at all times.

- If walking at night, wear bright colors or reflective vests to be seen. Remember that the weather and elements may decrease visibility.

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