

Safety Cop



Avoid Winter Slip, Trip & Falls

Cold weather brings with it a number of hazards: slips and falls from wet floors, stairs and ice; frostbite and hypothermia from exposure to extreme temperatures; overexertion when removing snow; and injury from snowplows and power shovels.

Cold weather risks include carbon monoxide from improperly vented heating systems, vehicles and generators; and accidents caused by inattentive driving, bad weather and poor road conditions. While all of these winter hazards can cause serious injuries, preventing slips and falls is the focus of this article.

No. 1 Accident Cause

In any season, slips, trips and falls are the number one cause of workplace injuries reported to NYSIF, matching national trends. Even the safest businesses are not immune. Despite making tremendous strides in its safety program and its remarkable safety record turnaround, North Country Academy reported one weather-related slipping injury last winter.

An Albany-area manufacturer's largest claim didn't occur on the assembly line. A fall on a sidewalk barely covered with snow caused a severe back injury to a worker that pushed the policyholder's experience mod past the limit for the Compulsory Code Rule 59 Workplace Safety Program. Prudence dictates that you take winter slipping hazards seriously and address them as soon as they occur.

Begin by examining your entrances and exits. Are doors, stairs, and walking surfaces in good condition?

Keep It Dry

Snow, water or ice can cause falls, so address them now instead of waiting for an accident to happen. Be sure to clean and mop floors continually, or place non-slip absorbent mats at entrances.

This is especially important in retail store locations, building lobbies, and similar high traffic areas where people drip snow, water and mud from their shoes.

Floor surface maintenance is also an important consideration. Be certain that your staff uses proper cleaning, stripping and finishing products on tile and vinyl floors; using the wrong products (or using them improperly) increases the risk of slipping hazards.

Train staff to watch power cords of cleaning and buffing machines to prevent tripping. Use "wet floor" signs and barricades when appropriate.

Clear That Snow

Many areas of New York receive significant snowfall, but the slightest amount of snow can cause problems. Review your snow removal plans annually:

- Ensure that employees receive adequate training on snow removal equipment.
- Do they know how to operate blowers, power shovels and tractors? Can they clear jams and blockages safely? The law prohibits anyone under 18 from using powered equipment.
- Perform recommended periodic equipment checks and maintenance.
- Familiarize workers with your terrain and problem spots

If you use contractors, confirm that snow removal firms are ready to provide service. Check that ice or snow-melting chemicals are appropriate for the temperature and surfaces on which they will be used. Gravel walks and parking lots have caused slips and falls; one policyholder paved them after sustaining a large winter claim. If possible, direct workers and customers to avoid gravel walks and paths during winter.

Emphasize Attentive Work Habits

An important step in reducing winter slips and falls is having your employees watch their step. Lack of attention when walking is a major cause of many slip-and-fall injuries. Instruct workers to focus on what's underfoot, especially checking for slippery patches and snow that might conceal ice. The transition from a carpeted to polished floor can also be hazardous. Make these items part of your winter safety training:

- Just as in driving, avoid distractions where walking is treacherous.
- Require workers to wear appropriate footwear for the weather and working conditions, especially if they work outside, or frequently go from indoors to outdoors. (North Country Academy requires staff to change from outdoor shoes to indoor shoes for work indoors.)
- Workers who carry items should follow safe lifting and carrying procedures to maintain their balance. Never twist or make abrupt turns when lifting, but especially when the footing is slippery.

You and your workers can avoid winter slips and falls by following basic precautions and using common sense. Then you can laugh at the hazards Old Man Winter throws your way.

Safety & Risk Management

