

SAFETY COMMUNICATION

— Accident Investigation

Preventing the Next Accident



One of your employees has slipped and fallen. He's been transported to the hospital for treatment and possible surgery. Not a good day for him or for you. You don't want this to happen to anyone else, so what can you do to prevent a similar accident from happening again?

The first step to prevention is establishing an understanding of how the accident happened in the first place, and that requires a good accident investigation.

Most accident report files contain just the surface information needed to file the workers' compensation claim with no solid information regarding the real causes of the accident. Without effective corrective measures, the accident scenario is bound to occur again and again.

Here is a quick overview on how to conduct an effective accident investigation:

Purpose: Always keep in mind that the purpose of the accident investigation is to prevent the accident from happening again. Forget about whose fault it might have been. We are looking for ways to prevent future accidents.



Secure the Scene: After obtaining treatment for the injured, secure the scene of the accident to ensure that important information is preserved. You may need to barricade the area with cones or warning tape.

Investigation Kit: Here are some items that will help you conduct an effective investigation: camera; report forms; clipboard and pens for taking notes; graph paper for sketching the scene; flashlight; tape measure; and bloodborne pathogens exposure control kit.

Investigation Team: Several people should be included in the investigation: the supervisor should always be involved, and the manager may need to be involved, as well as safety personnel, safety committee members (if available), and possibly a technical expert depending on the seriousness of the injury.

Gather the Basics: Gather the basics listed on the report forms: names of injured, names of witnesses, time and date of accident, location of the incident, work shift, etc.

Obtain Visual Records: The best way to record the accident conditions is to take photographs. Sketches are also helpful and are important for noting from what point of view each photograph was taken.

Questions: There are several basic questions that need to be asked: what happened; when did it happen; where did it happen; who was involved; why did it happen today; how did it happen; why did it happen; how can we keep it from happening again. The last three questions are the most important to answer. Don't speculate or guess, find out the answers.

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Interview Witnesses: Talk to anyone who was directly involved, eyewitnesses, anyone who knows or heard something about the incident, and anyone with technical information about the conditions that contributed to the accident.

When Interviewing: Interview one witness at a time. Ensure they understand that your purpose is to prevent a recurrence. Allow them to describe the accident in their own words. Remember to discuss what happened leading up to and after the accident. Use open ended questions that require more than a simple “yes” or “no” answer.

Review Relevant Records: Past accidents often contain information that will help you prevent a future incident, so review past accidents involving the same equipment, occurring in the same area, or involving similar tasks. Other records to review may include: training records, material safety data sheets, policies and procedures, inspection records, and maintenance records.

Establish the Sequence of Events: Find out what events lead up to the accident. Get a solid description of the accident. Find out what happened immediately after the accident. You may find it helpful to draw a chart of the events.

Analyze Your Findings: What are the immediately apparent causes? Now dig deeper and find out what “root” causes allowed those immediate causes to develop. As an example, the puddle of water on the floor was the immediate cause of the accident, but why was it there? When looking for root causes remember that there is almost always more than one cause. Look at employee behaviors, management actions, equipment, personal protective equipment, the environment, the work area, policies and procedures, and the work process.



Take Corrective Actions: It is important to take immediate corrective action to prevent further injury. This may take the form of taking similar equipment out of service, posting warning signs, conducting refresher training, or temporarily changing the procedure. Assign dates and follow-up schedules for both temporary and permanent corrective actions. Review the adequacy of the corrective actions to ensure they are effective. Be sure to share what you learned with others within your department and the agency to help prevent a similar accident elsewhere.

Corrective Action Tips: Find a corrective action for every root cause identified. Make your corrective actions very specific. Include a timetable for each corrective action and assign specific people to be responsible for carrying out the corrective action. Most importantly, be sure to follow-up to ensure that the corrective actions were implemented and were effective.

Accidents don’t have to keep happening again and again. We can change and improve the future by finding the root causes of accidents and taking corrective action to stop those root causes from developing again.