Stay Safe On Stairways

Slips, trips and falls rank only behind motor vehicle accidents as the leading cause of industrial deaths in North America. Many of these fatalities involve stairways.

Serious stairway accidents occur most often when people are walking down stairs. Every year, new incidents result for the same old reasons:

- slippery surfaces
- losing balance because items being carried block vision
- handrail not used
- poor lighting
- defective or uneven steps
- unexpected items stored on stairs
- untied or defective footwear
- not paying attention
- running

Stairway accidents can be prevented through awareness, engineering, construction and housekeeping. Any of us can get involved with at least one of these factors. Knowing the potential hazards of a stairway and how to deal with them are key elements of awareness. Do not assume someone else will fix or report problems.

Many stairways at remote sites are temporary. Often, handrails are not installed, stairs are constructed with substandard materials and makeshift steps are constructed from scrap materials. Also, in isolated locations where mud and debris make their way to the stairs, this combination sets the stage for stairway slips and falls.

Most jurisdictions have specific standards and requirements for the provision of safe stairways.

Experience long ago showed that riser heights and tread widths should be uniform throughout a flight of stairs. Riser heights greater than seven inches (18 centimeters) or less than four

inches (10 cm) have been found to be dangerous, as have tread widths less than 9.5 inches (24 cm).

Stairways with four or more risers, or rising more than 30 inches (76 cm) in height require railings along each unprotected side or edge. When the top edge of a stair rail system also serves as a handrail, it should be no more than 37 inches (94 cm) and no less than 36 inches (92 cm) high.

Handrails shouldn’t be more than 37 inches (94 cm) high. Their upper surfaces should be no less than 30 inches (76 cm) from the surface of the tread.

The surfaces of stair rail systems and handrails should not have gouges that puncture skin or snag objects.

If you must carry objects while using a stairway, the load should be small enough to allow one hand to be free to hold the railing.

It’s essential that stairways be kept clear of trash, cords and other tripping hazards.

Stairways aren’t storage areas. Any obstructions should be reported or cleared immediately.