



Keep Your Food on the Plate and Off the Floor: What Every Restaurant Should Do to Prevent Slip-and-Fall Accidents

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The average restaurant has between 3 and 9 slip-and-fall accidents every year. In fact, an estimated 3 million foodservice employees and 1 million guests are injured annually from slip-and-fall accidents at restaurants. The aggregate cost of such injuries is a staggering \$2 billion!

Striving for excellent service, quality food, and a welcoming environment is not enough; successful restaurateurs also know that ensuring the safety of guests and employees on their premises is of paramount importance.

You can avoid—or at least minimize—losses resulting from slip-and-fall accidents by: (1) becoming aware of the causes of such accidents; (2) knowing what steps to take to prevent them from happening in the first place; and (3) implementing a strategy to pursue if an accident does occur.

Causes of Slip-and-Fall Accidents

Wet floors—whether caused by spills or cleaning—present a serious slip hazard, and nowhere is this more true than in restaurants. In fact, slip-and-fall accidents are the leading cause of injuries at restaurants, and 50% of those incidents are caused by wet or otherwise dangerous floors. The remaining half are attributable to improper footwear (24%), inadequate hazard identification (9%), insufficient training (7%), and (unfortunately) fraud (10%).

Prevention

Consider the following steps to keep your restaurant out of a “slippery” situation:

- 1. Select the Proper Floor.** Certain flooring is simply not appropriate for restaurants. Every floor has a coefficient of friction (COF), which has two components: static COF and dynamic COF. The static COF measures the “slip potential” (*i.e.*, how much traction it takes to induce a slip), while the dynamic COF quantifies a person’s stopping ability once they begin to slip. To determine the best flooring for your restaurant, consider hiring a “certified walkway auditor” or other qualified professional who is versed in safety standards, experienced in identifying hazards, and skilled at using a slip meter to measure the COF of your flooring.
- 2. Written Policies.** Restaurants should establish written policies and procedures to help maintain safe premises. In addition, employees and managers must be properly trained on those procedures. Frequent and routine inspections of the dining room and restroom floors to ensure that they are clean and dry is a must. It’s also a good idea to require employees to complete an inspection checklist, including the date and time a particular employee inspected the floors. In addition, managers should conduct regular safety meetings to emphasize safety measures and reinforce the safety policies in place. Implementing these procedures can help minimize risk in the event of litigation.
- 3. Proper Footwear.** It seems simple, but proper footwear is essential in the battle against slip-and-fall accidents. Although you cannot control the footwear your guests wear, you can, and should, require that your employees wear shoes with low heels and slip-resistant soles.

4. **Welcome Mats.** Not only do entrance mats welcome guests to your restaurant, they can also provide an important first line of defense against slips by removing moisture from your guests' footwear. You should look for mats with a high-traction backing to prevent movement. Welcome mats, however, can also contribute to accidents if they are not carefully selected, correctly placed, and properly maintained.
5. **Wet Floor Signs.** Finally, the posting of wet floor signs can be an important aid in preventing slip-and-fall accidents. Restaurants should use signs that are visible from every angle and tall enough to catch the guests' attention. Although many brightly colored signs are available, OSHA requires the warnings to be in yellow. Again, a small investment on the front end can be of significant value in a subsequent lawsuit.

Investigation

Unfortunately, even in restaurants that enforce top safety practices, slip-and-fall accidents still occur. In such instances, conducting a proper investigation and documenting the facts and circumstances surrounding the fall is important. After a slip-and-fall accident, a manager should complete an incident report form, which should include the following information:

- Date, time, and exact location of the incident;
- Identification of witnesses, including contact information;
- Details with regard to post-incident inspection of the area, including (i) who inspected the area, (ii) when the inspection took place, and (iii) what was seen at the time of the inspection; and
- Identification of employees on duty at the time of the incident.

If a camera is available, photographs should be taken of the location where the fall took place. If possible, the manager should obtain a detailed summary of the incident from the person who fell. Finally, if security cameras captured the fall, the video *must* be preserved.

Total immunity from a slip-and-fall lawsuit is impossible. Even if your restaurant is in pristine condition and you diligently follow your written policies, accidents (and lawsuits) happen. Restaurants able to provide thorough documentation about an incident to their insurance claim professionals and attorneys can significantly bolster their own defense against a subsequent claim. The suggestions discussed above should drastically reduce the potential for a lawsuit, as well as decrease the value of any claim.

Every restaurant should add slip-and-fall prevention to its menu.

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