



Working feet and footwear

Health and safety at work guidance





Many workers face problems with their feet or legs because of the wrong footwear or because they are forced to stand for too long. Feet bear the brunt of the daily working life. Prolonged standing, badly fitting footwear, high heels, slippery surfaces and falling objects are just some of the dangers to which we expose our feet in the workplace.



It is estimated that around 80 per cent of the adult population has some form of foot problem. This can vary from aches and pains, swelling and corns to fungal infections and varicose veins. While not all of these are a result of work activities, a large proportion are. Our feet are exposed to many dangers at work and, like every other danger, the risk can be avoided or removed if employers take simple straightforward steps to protect their workers.

The biggest risk probably comes from slips and trips. This can be caused by inappropriate footwear but often the problem is not just with the footwear but the actual surface. Employers should make sure that floors are kept clean and dry and, where that is not possible, special flooring may need to be installed.

Employers' duties

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 makes it quite clear that the employer has to provide a safe working environment. In addition, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 also require employers to conduct a suitable and sufficient risk assessment on the health and safety of their workers. If any risks are found then they must be removed or reduced.

The Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations 1999 also say that, if a risk has been identified and cannot be controlled any other way, then protective equipment must be provided. This includes footwear. If an employer provides protective equipment, such as footwear, then it must be provided free of charge and there must be instructions on how to use it safely.

A lot of problems are caused by inadequate footwear. Work in any environment where there is a risk of slipping requires slip-resistant shoes. Where there is the risk of a shoe being crushed or hit by an object, or even caught in machinery, safety footwear must be provided. If there is the possibility of standing on nails or other sharp objects then the employer must provide puncture-resistant soles.

Choosing footwear

Workers should be able to wear the footwear that is appropriate to their occupation, working environment, and feet. That means employers should ensure that the risk assessment they have to do by law includes risks to the feet as well as slipping risks, and if safety or special footwear is required they must supply it at no cost to the worker.

Wherever special footwear is provided the employer must make sure that it fits properly and should allow the toes wiggle room (around 1cm gap between the longest toe and the end of the shoe). There should also be a choice of shoes and worker representatives should be involved in choosing which ones are offered. This will help ensure that workers wear them.

Even if safety footwear is not required then the employer should give advice on appropriate footwear.

Comfortable, properly fitted footwear is essential to maintaining good foot health. Many minor foot ailments can be relieved with properly fitted and carefully selected shoes. The Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists gives the following advice on choosing footwear:

Tips on getting the right fit

- Always have both feet measured because they may not be the same size. When choosing shoes, the length, width and depth of the shoes are important.
- Always try on both shoes.
- Ensure there is enough room at the front of the shoes to allow for the natural movement of your toes when walking – your toes should be able to wiggle.
- Make sure there is around 1 cm space between your longest toe and the end of the shoe.
- When choosing new shoes, take time to test them out, and walk around to ensure maximum comfort.
- Don't break in new shoes. Shoes that fit well should feel comfortable.
- As you get older, your feet tend to get larger, so get them measured periodically.
- A good fit doesn't necessarily mean high expense.

Safety shoes also need to be comfortable and correctly fitted. There is a misconception that safety shoes, especially protective toecaps, will be uncomfortable, but if the shoes are padded and fitted correctly you should not be able to feel the toecaps at all.

Choosing the best safety shoes – what to look for

It is important to ensure that the safety shoe is appropriate for the task for which it is intended. Any protective equipment, including shoes provided by an employer, should meet European standards. There are various standards for footwear, including one for safety footwear, another for protective footwear, and a third for occupational footwear. Any footwear that is being supplied must be certified and stamped with the CE mark.

Unfortunately, current European standards do not cover slip resistance and any footwear should not only comply to European standards but also should be certified as slip resistant.

Yet many products claiming to meet European standards or to be slip resistant are sub-standard, so safety representatives should ensure that the employer requests test data from the supplier. Further advice on this is available on the HSE website (role of manufacturers and suppliers of footwear).

Case study – no more slip ups

Following a large number of injuries from slips, a pet food company brought in slip-resistant footwear. This was introduced in full consultation with the workforce. At the end of a seven-month trial the group of workers using traditional footwear had suffered 15 slip injuries while a similar sized group using the new footwear had suffered no injuries. The new footwear is now being used throughout the site and slip accidents have been removed entirely.



However, in addition to ensuring that the safety footwear meets the required legal standards it is also important to make sure that they are comfortable. Safety representatives should look at the following points:

- **Upper** – should be made from natural materials such as leather or a breathable man-made fabric. Some leather has a plastic coating to repel water and allow the shoe to be wiped clean.
- **Lining** – should be a breathable material to keep the foot fresh. Linings need to be smooth and seam-free.
- **Toe area** – should be foot-shaped and deep enough to prevent rubbing and allow the toes to wriggle. This is especially important with protective toecaps. If the shoes are padded and fitted properly, you should not be able to feel the toecaps at all.
- **Insole** – preferably removable to allow easy insertion of padding or orthoses.
- **Heel fit** – the heel should fit snugly on the foot, stopping the heel slipping out of the shoe and stabilising the foot upon ground contact.
- **Heel** – should have a broad base and be no higher than 4cm. If worn for long stretches they should be no more than 2cm in height.
- **Sole** – should be strong and flexible with shock absorption to cushion the jolts of walking on hard surfaces. Material should be slip resistant, such as rubber, polyurethane or PVC.
- **Fastenings** – laces, buckles or Velcro to secure the foot in the shoe.

Case study – avoid spills
The HSE issued an improvement notice against a baking company following a series of slips. In addition to introducing anti-slip footwear the company also introduced drip traps around the conveyors to reduce spillage and improved the cleaning regime to effectively deal with any spillage that did get onto the floor. As a result the number of slip accidents dropped by over 75 per cent.

However, the importance of proper footwear goes well beyond just appropriate safety footwear. In fact it is important in every workers life that staff are encouraged to wear 'sensible' and appropriate footwear. Many occupations will have different footwear requirements but in almost all of them there is a need for a good fitting supportive shoe. Some shoes are less appropriate than others and may cause problems. Slip-ons, for instance, are less suited for daily use than shoes with straps or lace over the insets because the foot is more likely to slide forward in the shoe.

Dress code

In many occupations, in particular where staff deal with the public, employers enforce a dress code that includes footwear. Sometimes this code prevents staff from wearing comfortable and sensible shoes and instead insists they wear slip-ons or inappropriate heels. This can apply particularly to women. Apart from being extremely sexist, these policies can lead to long-term foot problems. Safety representatives should ensure that dress codes do not prevent people from wearing comfortable, healthy footwear.

Standing

While inadequate footwear can cause problems for feet, so can prolonged standing. The HSE estimates that almost 200,000 people are suffering occupational lower limb disorders caused or made worse by their work. Often one of the causes is prolonged standing. This can damage joints, cause swelling of the legs, and result in a range of problems for the feet, including bunions and corns, steel spurs and even flat feet. Workers who are required to spend too much time on their feet are at greatly increased risk of pain and discomfort around their feet, legs, hips and lower back. Varicose veins are also associated with prolonged standing.

The dangers of prolonged standing have been known for hundreds of years, and even in the nineteenth century doctors called for employers in shops to provide seating because of the large number of foot ailments caused by prolonged standing. Sadly there has been little improvement in the last hundred years and many employers still insist their staff stand, even when there is absolutely no need.

In fact both constant standing and prolonged sitting can result in health problems. The preferred, healthy option is to give staff the option of sitting, standing or moving around whenever appropriate. It is normally recommended that workers should spend no more than 30 per cent of their working day standing.

Safety representatives have been successful in ensuring that workers are given a choice in a number of industries. This includes supermarkets where the shopworkers' union, USDAW, has managed in some cases to get checkouts redesigned to give staff the option of sitting or standing.

In the print industry, the union Unite, following complaints of bad feet and back problems, managed to get cushioned insoles supplied and anti-fatigue matting fitted for some print workers.

Safety representatives should ensure that the risks from prolonged standing are included in any risk assessments and that suitable alternatives are provided where appropriate.

Case study – don't stand for it!

A large cash and carry introduced new checkouts with no seats. There had been no consultation with the trade union and there were a number of problems as a result. After the company was threatened with enforcement action by a number of local authorities they agreed to talk to the union and, some years later, they agreed to introduce conventional seating in most of their checkouts.

In addition there is a separate requirement on employers to do a specific risk assessment to protect pregnant workers. This risk assessment should take account of all women of 'child-bearing age' not just those already pregnant or who have given birth. Prolonged standing and fatigue is a particular problem for pregnant women and the employer should always ensure that seating is available and also allow short breaks from prolonged standing.

The HSE have taken enforcement action against employers for failing to provide suitable seats for work that could be undertaken sitting. Safety representatives should consider complaints to the enforcing authority if workers' health is being damaged by a failure to provide seating.

Safety reps' checklist

- Ensure that risk assessment include any risks to feet. This can include risks of slipping, prolonged standing, injury, and prolonged use of inappropriate footwear.
- Make sure that the employer does not simply see protective or safety footwear as the answer, but first tries to remove or reduce the risk.
- Make sure that specific risk assessments are done for pregnant women.
- Ensure that any protective footwear not only meets European standards, but also is suitable and comfortable.
- Ensure that workers are involved in decisions on the choice of footwear.
- Review dress codes to ensure that they do not prevent workers from wearing comfortable and practical footwear.
- Ensure that workers are provided with information on the importance of wearing comfortable and suitable footwear.
- Ensure that if there is a requirement on employees to wear special footwear for health and safety reasons the employer pays the full cost of this.
- If there are any agency workers in the workplace ensure that it is clear who is responsible for supplying any safety equipment – the employer or the agency.
- Ensure workers have the option of sitting where possible, and the appropriate seating is provided.
- If prolonged standing is required make sure that there are sufficient breaks, that cushioned footwear is provided and, if possible, anti-fatigue matting is installed.
- Where there is prolonged standing then consider job rotation.

Further information

For information on the Working Feet campaign of the Society of Chiropractors and Podiatrists go to: www.feetforlife.org/

The TUC has information on slips trips and falls at:
www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/index.cfm?mins=573

HSE advice on slips and trips is at: www.hse.gov.uk/slips/index.htm

There is separate HSE advice on choosing footwear at: www.hse.gov.uk/slips/manufactfoot.htm

Hazards magazine has a lot of useful information on standing: www.hazards.org/standing/

