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Slip and Fall Issues

In December 2005, Bill Williams sued a well-known U.S. chain of gyms because he fell in the sauna at one of their locations. Apparently he slipped on the floor, fell on a bench and now, according to court documents, experiences “persistent neck and head pain and associated intermittent tingling feelings” in his hands. Williams sued the gym claiming negligence and alleged that several members of the gym had warned gym managers about hazards in the sauna, indicating it was a “problem waiting to happen.” At trial, the court agreed with Williams and awarded him \$15,000 for medical costs, pain, and suffering. However, in what was considered an unexpected turn of events, an appeals court reversed the decision, stating that Williams as well as all gym members had signed a contract “expressly releasing gym management from liability due to improper maintenance.”*

Although the appeals court sympathized with Williams and did believe gym management was negligent, the signed contract by gym members superseded any compassion for the victim. Though the gym’s management may have ultimately won this case, it still cost several thousand dollars in legal fees, plus a lot of negative feelings and press that impacted the gym’s member base and the local community where the accident occurred. And, this is just one example of a slip and fall accident. Although the statistics can vary, the number of slip and fall accidents in the U.S. is staggering. For example, it is estimated there are about eight million slip, trip, and fall accidents each year. They occur in homes, offices, gyms, and other public facilities. Of these, about half a million people require some sort of hospitalization and more than 16,000 result in death. In fact, slip and fall accidents are considered one of the leading

causes of death in the workplace. However, just as with the unfortunate case discussed earlier, many of these accidents can be prevented through preventive strategies, proper floor care, cleaning, and maintenance.

Risk Factors

Before venturing further, some clarifications are due. A slip is the result of too little friction or traction between footwear and the floor. Trips, on the other hand, occur when one or both feet strike or hit an object, causing loss of balance. Both slips and trips can affect your forward motion, causing your upper-body positioning to fall ahead of or behind your lower body—eventually, you lose your balance and a fall is often the result.

Slips, trips, and falls can occur just about anywhere in an office setting, school, factory, public building, and gym. A variety of what are termed risk factors or indoor hazards can trigger an accident. Some of the most common factors and hazards include:

- Wet or oily floor surfaces
- Inappropriate footwear
- Loose, unanchored carpets, rugs, mats, or floor tiles
- Obstructed views
- Poor lighting
- Clutter on the floor
- Wrinkled carpeting
- Cables or cords laid across walkways.

Gym managers should be aware of these risk hazards and regularly take the time to walk through their gym and see if any of these exist in their facilities. Corrective measures now can help prevent a serious accident later.

Preventive Strategies

One of the best ways any facility, including a gym, can take to prevent a slip, trip, or fall is to install high-performing matting systems. An effective matting system is designed to trap and hold moisture, soil, grease, dirt, and other contaminants *before* these are walked in the door.

According to Christopher Tricozzi, vice president of sales and marketing for Crown Mats and Matting, a leading U.S. manufacturer of matting systems, stopping moisture and soil before it enters the door is key. “Many managers will place matting systems inside doorways, but they should actually start outdoors by installing what are termed ‘scraper’ mats at all building entries,” he says. Tricozzi says that the scraper mat should be followed by a wiper/scraper mat, directly inside a building. “Often, this is the entry vestibule area between two sets of doors. And, this is followed by a wiper mat, designed to capture and hold any remaining moisture and soil off shoe bottoms.” “Gym managers need about 15 feet of matting outside and inside the building,” he adds. “We really can’t depend on people to properly wipe their feet so the 15 feet of matting [helps] ensure that as much as 80 percent of the moisture and contaminants are prevented from being walked in the gym.”

Also, as referenced earlier, Tricozzi adds that managers should select what are termed *high-performance* mats. These are mats that facilities typically purchase, rather than rent. Not only are these mats engineered to be more effective, they last much longer than a rental mat. “A high-performance mat may last two years or more, whereas a rental mat may only last a few months and end up in a landfill [shortly thereafter]. High-performance matting is just more effective, cost effective, and environmentally responsible,” explains Tricozzi.

Floor Care and Maintenance

Next to eliminating risk factors and installing high-performance matting, proper floor care and maintenance is essential. Gym managers are advised to incorporate regularly scheduled strip, scrub, and refinish programs to keep floors as clean as possible. This should definitely include locker room and shower areas, where tile and grout floors are often installed. These cleaning regimens will help remove bacteria that may be developing in grout areas, which can cause a slip or fall.

Very often, the type of floor equipment used in floor care can help promote floor safety, says Daniel Frimmel, a technical service representative with Tornado Industries, a

leading manufacturer of floor care equipment. “Many facilities use rotary floor machines. While these can do an excellent job, for tile and grout floors, a different technology, cylindrical floor machines, may prove to be more effective.”

Cylindrical floor machines use counter-rotating brushes and not pads, which are found on conventional machines. Rotating at more than 1,000 rotations per minute, the brushes penetrate the porous surfaces of a floor. These machines reach deep into grout areas to help remove embedded bacteria and soil, which also helps maintain the floor’s slip resistance. “Also, because the machine does a lot more of the work, less water and chemical are usually called for, making this technology Greener and more sustainable,” adds Frimmel.

Additionally, as to daily care, Frimmel advises that gym floors should be dust-mopped or vacuumed and damp-mopped daily and sometimes several times during the day. The mop heads and cleaning solution should be changed frequently in the cleaning process. “Once the solution becomes dirty, managers run the risk of spreading germs, bacteria, and soil on the floor,” he adds. “This can make the floor unhealthy as well as slippery, resulting in a slip, trip, or fall.”

And, Frimmel has one final recommendation that is “so obvious it is often overlooked.” All gyms should have in stock and utilize warning and safety cones. “Whenever and wherever there is a suspected problem that could lead to an injury, use these [safety devices]. At the very least, it can limit your liability should there be an accident and at its best, the warning and safety cones can prevent [an incident] from happening at all.”

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*Editors Note: The names have been changed here, this is an actual occurrence and involved a Gelds Gym.

About Crown Mats and Matting

For more than 60 years, Crown Mats and Matting has been a pioneer in the development and manufacture of matting products. Beginning with the invention of walk-off matting by the company's founder, R.P. Johnson, the company now has the

most diverse matting product line offered in our industry. Crown sells matting through an extensive network of highly trained sales representatives throughout the United States and worldwide. These sales experts are familiar with the features and benefits of all matting systems and are able to help their clients find the right system for virtually any application.

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