

Is housekeeping a 'dirty' word on the job?

If you've ever lived with a small child, you understand how housekeeping can affect safety. That spoon or toy a child leaves on the floor may send someone sliding across the room or tumbling into the wall. The same is true in the workplace. When workers leave tools next to equipment, water on the floor or boxes in walkways, these normally harmless items become hazards.

Take the cleaning quiz

Housekeeping and safety go together. Many housekeeping tips seem basic, yet they often go unheeded and cause thousands of injuries annually. Take an unannounced walk through your workplace and see if your housekeeping system really stands up. Keep a checklist to note:

- Are passageways kept clear?
- Does stacked material impede workers' vision?
- How often is combustible waste removed to minimize fire hazards?
- Are all aisles, walkways, traffic areas and exits kept free of stored materials?
- How conveniently placed are receptacles for waste and debris, and are they covered?
- Are wet floors clearly marked and sectioned off?
- Are ventilation systems clear of dust and debris and not blocked by stored material?

Many occupational injuries are attributed to defective maintenance, such as trips on broken floors or worn steps or stairs. Make sure your floors are free from holes; irregularities; uneven surfaces; and accumulations of waste, oil or slippery substances.

In addition, stored materials should not block light sources, and make sure burned-out lightbulbs or fluorescent tubes are replaced immediately.

Mind the daily details

Day-to-day housekeeping and cleanliness should not be left for employees to do during the last few minutes of the workday.

Housekeeping should be an ongoing effort. Some employers hire cleaning crews employed solely for that purpose.



Another alternative is having the plant services department – or the most appropriate department in your company – provide general housekeeping as part of the organization's safety program. Having a clean, safe environment should be a concern of all employees.

Therefore, all employees can take little steps every day to keep their areas clean and prevent a larger mess from causing problems.

Every department in your organization may have its own safety needs but many principles apply across the board, such as keeping areas uncluttered.

Track down trouble

A good practice your organization might want to adopt is sending out a team on a weekly or monthly basis to scour the plant or building for housekeeping and maintenance issues to resolve. This kind of system allows you to track housekeeping performance and provides employees with the ability to make a difference.

An ideal team should be made up of employees from different levels (for example, managers, supervisors, maintenance staff and hourly workers). In addition, all employees should be free to report and write up any unsafe condition they cannot immediately address. Whether employees are on a team, report a trouble area or clean the workplace themselves, each one plays a role in keeping the jobsite clean and safe.

Keep your workplace clean and neat

- Floors should be swept or vacuumed as often as the dustiness of the operation demands.
- Report cracks, splinters and ruts in the floor to your supervisor as soon as they are discovered.
- Piling, stowing and stacking should be safe, orderly and neat.
- Cabinets used for storage should be kept closed when not in use.
- When storing ladders, racks are the best solution. Never leave a ladder on the floor or leaning against a wall.
- Scrap, clips, cuttings and dust should be dumped directly from machines or benches into containers – not onto the floor.
- Always clean up any spilled oil or grease before you leave a machine or the area.
- Never store anything in or on electrical control boxes.
- Never block exits or firefighting equipment with any kind of material.
- Set a good example for your fellow employees. If you promptly pick up litter from the floor and properly dispose of it, other employees may follow suit.

For more 5-minute safety talks, visit nsc.org/members.