

Safety Zone: Restaurants: Increase Workplace Safety with Seven Proactive Tips

Working in a restaurant can be dangerous. The year 2019 saw 151 workers fatally injured in food service establishments and drinking places (Bureau of Labor Statistics NAICS 722). Workplace injuries can range from a fall caused by food or water on the floor, strains from repetitive tasks to a robbery-related shooting. Even one injury in a small restaurant can increase workers' compensation premiums or cause the loss of a valuable employee.

Restaurant owners want to prevent employee injuries. They also want to avoid the significant fines levied by OSHA (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration) if working conditions endanger employees. Remember, restaurants are subject to the same workplace safety standards as heavy industry and other businesses, although the composition might differ. OSHA prescribes rules and regulations that cover the type of environment and work activity found in restaurants. Any businesses found to be in violation of applicable standards are subject to costly fines and other enforcement activity.

No one wants an injured employee or an OSHA fine. To reduce the risk of injury or death to employees, focus on the seven key areas below. This article addresses common loss drivers in restaurants and is not all-inclusive. If you choose to use this information, it should be modified as appropriate to suit your individual operation and needs.

Prevent Burns

First, implement formal procedures addressing fire and heat. Ensure that all employees understand the fire and heat safety procedures in your workplace, including how to call for help.

- Provide proper protective equipment, including mitts, gloves, and aprons, to help prevent burns.
- Reduce scald burns by training employees, especially new hires, in proper techniques when working with or near hot equipment, liquids, and steam.
- When changing grease in the fryer, let it cool first. Use proper hand, face and body protection, and use a grease caddy for transport to the grease container.
- Provide first aid training to ensure employees know how to treat burns. Keep a complete first aid kit onsite and replenish it each time you use it.
- Follow the required schedule for the cleaning of hoods/ducts and servicing automatic extinguishing systems (AES). This can aid in fire prevention and ensure prompt extinguishing should a fire occur. AmTrust generally recommends scheduling semiannual cleaning of hood/ducts (and quarterly if the food product produces a high amount of grease-laden vapors). Installation of a vertical stainless steel barrier, extending at least eight inches above the surface of the fryer, between the deep fryer and any open flame, or clearance/separation of 16 inches or more between the deep fryer and open flame appliances, can aid in burn prevention.
- Make sure all employees know how to handle grease fires.

Note: Use portable fire extinguishers only if you have provided the PROPER TRAINING that ensures workers can do the job SAFELY and only after sounding an alarm, summoning the fire department, and activating the fixed fire-suppression system.



OSHA requires employers to educate workers about the correct use of fire extinguishers if workers will fight fires, no matter how slight the fire exposure. This training must include information about the types of fire extinguishers. To fight kitchen fires, the Class K fire extinguisher is the correct type.

Identifying Hazardous Materials

Employers should be very familiar with requirements relating to chemical use in their operations. OSHA's Hazard Communication Standard is aligned with the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labeling of Chemicals (GHS). See more information on GHS in our Safety Zone article: [System of Classification and Labeling of Chemicals](#).

A written Hazard Communications program should be in place and actively used. These programs encompass soaps, detergents, degreasers, sanitizers, floor cleaners, and others. Almost every restaurant uses these chemicals, and although they may seem safe, they pose a variety of hazards to those who work with and around them. Employers must train workers to understand the dangers of these chemicals, the correct use of cleaning supplies, and how to respond in an emergency such as a spill. Employees should review each chemical's label and Safety Data Sheet (SDS), which provides instructions for proper handling and mixing.

For more information on protecting employees from these common but significant hazards, be sure to review our Safety Zone article, [Chemical Safety for Restaurants](#).

Prevent Skin Lacerations

Teaching food prep new hires the importance of hand tool safety is vital because even though most restaurant workers know their way around a kitchen, hand tool injuries are one of the most frequent in the restaurant business. AmTrust recommends that employers furnish appropriate protective equipment, such as cut-resistant gloves, to those exposed to cutting hazards - from knives to slicers. Initial and ongoing training in blade safety can keep your workers safer and your injury rates lower.

Slips, Trips and Falls

Fall to surface events, whether on the same level or from one level to another, are among the foremost causes of injury in any work environment. The slip, trip, and fall injury is a leading problem for restaurants. Here are some of the top risks:

- Spills on floors
- Outdoor slipping hazards, including ice and snow, tracked indoors
- Loose mats or rugs
- Poor visibility caused by product obstruction or poor lighting
- Ice build-up and condensation on floors of walk-in freezers and coolers
- Walking surface disrepair, including uneven floor heights, clutter, cords, or other obstacles
- Parking area hazards from potholes to dim lighting

Tracking and analyzing falls and near misses (and other types of incidents) can help reduce future accidents by identifying trends, determining root causes, and implementing corrective measures to prevent a recurrence. At regular intervals, review the fall incidents your restaurant has experienced. Ask these questions:

- What are the slip and fall hazards in the store? Include both the front of the house and the back of the house.
- What conditions in your environment normally lead to slips and falls? How can you change those conditions?
- What controls can you establish that would reduce losses? For instance, AmTrust recommends an enforced non-slip footwear policy as well as clear spill response procedures that prompt employees to take immediate action to address floor hazards.
- What training can you implement to prevent slips and falls? Even a five-minute reminder at shift change can reduce losses.

Because many workers begin their careers in restaurants, always assume new employees have no safety training at all. What makes sense to more experienced workers is completely unknown to new career talent. To keep them safe, guide them on the kind of shoes to wear, the speed at which they walk and open doors, and other activities that could lead to falls.

Material Handling and Ergonomic Hazards

Material handling, such as moving heavy boxes, retrieving stock, emptying containers, and even cashiering, are frequent causes of injuries in restaurants. Never assume employees know how to lift, even if they have prior food service experience.

- Train employees in proper lifting techniques. Always encourage employees to ask for help when lifting anything heavy or awkward.
- Consider improvements to material handling methods, including improving workstation arrangement, providing carts, limiting the weight of materials employees can lift by themselves, and encouraging teamwork.

- AmTrust recommends storage of heavy items at mid-body level. Establish a protocol and train employees to place the heaviest items on shelves located at mid-body height, rather than below knee level or above shoulder level. This best practice will reduce reaching or bending and allow loads to be held closer to the body, reducing the potential of strains/sprains related to material handling.
- Working in awkward positions can lead to strains and other injuries, including neck, back, and shoulder damage. Provide ergonomic mats when employees must stand for long periods. Encourage proper footwear to avoid muscle fatigue and soreness in the back, legs, and feet.

Train for Potential Workplace Violence

Homicide is a leading cause of fatal occupational injuries in the United States. Any restaurant can experience workplace violence, especially those operating late night or early morning. Establish a workplace violence policy that not only gives clear guidance on what to do in specific situations but also strongly says you will not tolerate any act of aggression. Then train your employees in that policy because a policy without training simply gathers dust on a shelf. An emergency response plan that involves training and monthly reminders can both prevent violence and teach employees how to respond if they are threatened.

Investigate

Every accident or injury gives you an opportunity to learn and a signal to improve your processes and the work environment. An immediate, thorough investigation after an injury or incident minimizes the chance of similar events from happening again. AmTrust, and OSHA, strongly encourage restaurant owners to investigate all incidents resulting in injury, as well as close calls. This enables you to identify hazards, evaluate controls, and put measures in place to keep your workplace healthy and productive. For additional information and sample resources to help develop an effective accident investigation program, see this [Incident Investigation Review](#). After an investigation to determine the causes, you can then devise an effective way to prevent similar incidents.

Any of the hazards discussed above, and many others, can result in serious injury or even death. Having these seven steps in place BEFORE an incident occurs, not only will allow you to respond adequately, it may prevent that accident from happening at all. Identifying your specific hazards and implementing controls, consistent training beginning on day one, and accurate documentation, along with a formal accident investigation program, can help you avoid costly injuries and possible fines. It's good for your employees and it's good for your business.

For additional information and resources on this topic and other safety and risk management subjects, visit the [AmTrust Loss Control website](#).

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