If the Safety Shoe Fits the Hazard, Wear It

Safety Talk

What's At Stake

When you think of safety footwear, an image of steel-toed work boots likely comes to mind. These protect your feet against toe-crushing hazards. But is that the kind of protection your feet need? Choose carefully, because in certain instances, the right protective footwear can save your life.

What's The Danger

Statistics from the National Safety Council reported 180,000 disabling injuries to feet and toes each year. But that's not the whole story. If your footwear doesn't provide protection against live current, you can be electrocuted or suffer electrical burns.

Examples of Hazards

Hazards to the feet include:

- heavy objects such as barrels or tools that might strike, roll or fall onto feet;
- sharp objects such as nails or spikes that might pierce the soles or uppers of ordinary shoes;
- molten metal;
- chemicals;
- extreme hot or cold conditions;
- hot or wet surfaces;
- slippery surfaces;
- electrical hazards from coming into contact with exposed electrical conductors or grounding.

Some workplaces have more than one of these hazards.

How To Protect Yourself

It's important to match the foot protection to the hazard. Safety footwear comes in many different configurations. Some of your choices include:

Safety shoes (or boots): These have impact-resistant toes and heat-resistant soles that protect against hot surfaces common in roofing, paving and hot metal industries. Some have metal insoles to protect against puncture wounds and some have steel-toes. Other styles may be designed to be electrically conductive for use in explosive atmospheres, or nonconductive to protect from workplace electrical hazards.

Metatarsal guards: These are used when there is a risk of high impact to the instep or compression and are either an integral part of the shoes or strapped to the outside of shoes.

Hazardous materials boots: Also known as HazMat boots, these are worn when feet are exposed to hazardous substances such as acids or solvents. Some types are designed to be worn separately and may also feature a steel-toe or may be an overboot designed to go over safety footwear.

Shoe grips: Shoe grips are used when workers encounter hazards from slippery or icy surfaces. These are often strapped on over safety footwear.

Electrical safety shoes: There are several variations of these types of footwear, including:

- conductive shoes, which prevent static electricity build-up by providing a path to the ground,
- static dissipative shoes, which reduce static accumulation,
- electrical hazard shoes, which provide protection against shock hazards of 600 volts or less under dry conditions.

Sometimes the hazards extend beyond your foot and up all or part of the leg. The protective gear available for these situations include rubber spats, which protect against chemicals; knee and shin guards; leggings to protect against molten metal or welding sparks; and aprons to protect the upper legs against liquid splashes.

Final Word

Remember that like any other shoes, safety footwear doesn’t last forever. If it’s worn out, don’t push your luck by continuing to wear it.