Common workplace safety hazards

The National Safety Council has a team of consultants that travels the country – and the world – to visit worksites and conduct safety audits. No matter where each team member may be, chances are good that he or she will spot one or more of the following common safety hazards.

1. Working at height. Bureau of Labor Statistics data shows that falls to a lower level accounted for 14 percent of all fatalities in 2014, and OSHA standards related to scaffolding and ladders are regularly among the most frequently cited violations. Employers need to identify all locations where fall protection is necessary – as well as where the engineered anchor points are – train workers and regularly audit the fall protection program.

2. Poor housekeeping. Clutter blocking fire exits, aisles and emergency exits are common housekeeping problems that the consultants see. Another common hazard? Over-stacking loads on racks so that they are too close to a warehouse sprinkler head, which can limit the sprinkler’s efficiency in an emergency. Clutter, leaks and standing water also can contribute to slips, trips and falls.

3. Electrical – extension cords. Many electrical hazards spotted are related to inappropriate use of extension cords. Although extension cords can be useful for temporarily supplying power for certain operations, the key word is “temporarily.” When a cord is used for several weeks or months, OSHA doesn’t consider the use temporary. This may lead to a potential violation. Beyond that, extension cords lying on the ground for extended periods of time are a trip hazard.

4. Forklifts. A leading cause of forklift-related hazards is when workers feel compelled to work quickly and take shortcuts. Shortcuts include driving with too large of a load or driving distracted. The end result may be hitting a rack, damaging a wall or product, or even injuring a co-worker. Trucks should be inspected regularly to ensure they are in proper working order, and employers should create designated walkways.

5. Lockout/tagout. Proper lockout/tagout procedures can help prevent serious injuries, but only if those procedures are followed. Violations of lockout/tagout procedures often result from complacency, rushing to finish work or a worker being unfamiliar with the equipment he or she is using. Employers need to instruct employees on lockout/tagout and ensure they are qualified to carry out the procedures.

6. Chemical. When an organization buys and uses chemicals, it needs to have a control system, the consultants say. It needs to know what the chemicals are for and why they were ordered. OSHA’s Hazard Communication Standard requires facilities to keep an inventory of all products. Document the chemical’s expiration date, and use the chemical by that date or dispose of it properly.