

safety bulletin

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Top 5 Safety Risks for Veterinary Practices

Veterinarians and their staff face multiple potential hazards daily, oftentimes without even realizing it. These potential hazards include chemicals, respiratory hazards, sharps, lasers, ionizing radiation, and patients that are behaving fearfully or aggressively.

In this *Safety Bulletin*, we will explore five of the most common hazardous situations the PLIT program risk managers see during safety inspections—and provide tips to help your practice avoid them.

What is a safety inspection?

As a benefit to members whose veterinary practices have business insurance through AVMA PLIT, the program has dedicated risk consultants who may, upon request and based on availability, conduct a safety inspection of a veterinary practice to address specific issues or help the practice prepare for an OSHA inspection.

These safety inspections are exactly what they sound like: a walkthrough of a practice and buildings designed to identify any potentially dangerous areas and set about remedying them.



The goal of a safety inspection is to help practice owners provide their staff, patients, and clients with the safest experience possible. Safety inspections can cover a wide range of areas within a veterinary practice, and they can focus on several different compliance or best practice standards. The safety inspection process used by the AVMA PLIT program typically focuses on OSHA compliance as well as industry best practices that go above and beyond normal workplace safety recommendations.

Five Commonly Observed Safety Risks

1. Mishandling of hazardous materials
2. Slip, trip, and fall risks
3. Lack of a formal safety program
4. Inadequate bite-prevention and animal-handling protocols
5. Poor ergonomics

Not only do each of these risks affect nearly everyone within a veterinary practice (clients and patients included), but they are also present in both large- and small-animal settings. These risks are widespread and can lead to costly injuries. The following sections explore each risk in greater detail and provide tips for avoiding them

OSHA Safety Standards for Hazardous Materials

OSHA publishes safety standards that address all chemicals and hazardous materials within a workplace. These standards included guidance for training, labeling materials, conducting inventory, and performing reviews. Adherence to these standards is an area of risk management that many veterinary clinics overlook. This oversight can be costly, however, and may lead to injuries, illnesses, and citations from OSHA. To comply with OSHA's safety standards, begin by implementing a Hazard Communication program within your practice. This written policy should be distributed to all employees and should be specific to your clinic. Next, take inventory of all practice chemicals and ensure they are properly labeled and stored.

Lastly, conduct training for all employees who may come in contact with these chemicals to ensure they understand the risks involved with each substance. It is every employee's right to know what chemicals they are working with, how they can cause injuries or illness, and how they can protect themselves while using the chemicals.

Preventing Slips, Trips, and Falls

Slips, trips, and falls are three common but avoidable injuries. While they might sound benign, injuries resulting from falls can be serious and costly: strains, sprains, broken limbs, and even concussions are all possibilities. Common causes of these types of injuries include obstructions, loose mats and floor coverings, dangerously laid cables, spilled substances, and poor lighting.

In a fast-paced environment like a veterinary clinic, successfully dodging these obstacles is easier said than done. Even if one person manages to avoid a hazard, the next person may not be so lucky. All potential slip, trip, and fall hazards should be resolved as soon as they are noticed. We recommend routinely inspecting your practice for these hazards.

Benefits of a Formal Safety Program

A formal safety program is the foundation of a safe and compliant workplace. Statistically speaking, practices that have a formally implemented safety program experience fewer injuries than those that do not. When messages of workplace safety are promoted throughout the practice, employees are more mindful and aware of the hazards around them. The AVMA Trust program recommends creating and distributing written employee safety programs, conducting and documenting safety trainings, performing routine practice inspections, and holding safety meetings. These activities promote a strong safety culture within the practice and will help employees work together to reduce injuries.

Animal-Handling Protocols

Bites and scratches are a recognized industry hazard and the most common injuries in the veterinary space. The AVMA Trust has seen many claims that started as a minor cat bite and escalated to a significant infection, complete with serious complications due to delayed medical attention. Yet, even though they're an accepted risk of the job, it is possible to reduce their likelihood of occurring. All practices should implement a Bite-Prevention Program, and staff should be trained on proper animal restraint and [what to do in the aftermath of a bite](#). Taking these measures can lead to fewer bite and scratch injuries within your practice.





Ergonomics

Ergonomics is the study of the body's interaction with one's work environment. Injuries can result from repetitive movements, forceful exertion, awkward postures, incorrect lifting techniques, prolonged static loads, or a combination of these factors. While some injuries might not be severe, others such as strains and sprain injuries can require surgery, physical therapy, and a reduction in workload. Ergonomic injuries can also have a major impact on a veterinarian's long-term physical wellbeing; some injuries, like a strained back or shoulder, might heal but not return to the same level of functionality as before the injury.

Ergonomic injuries can be avoided by learning safe lifting techniques and by analyzing tasks to ensure that employees share similar degrees of risk. For example, if one employee is tasked with lifting dogs from the floor to the exam table each day, they may face a higher risk of injury. To reduce the risk, train all employees on safe lifting techniques and have them share or rotate this task. Ergonomic modifications may require some creativity and restructuring but in the long run, they will prevent nagging aches, pains, and injuries for clinic staff.

Claims Resulting from Practice Dangers

Unlabeled Chemicals Create a Lethal Combination

Clinic A routinely purchased industrial-sized containers of bleach and poured the cleaner into several small, unmarked spray bottles for ease of use. The shelf where the small bottles were stored was also not labeled. A new employee who was unfamiliar with the bottling procedure went to clean up a mess in an exam room and noticed that the spray bottle she had grabbed was running low. She saw a large spray bottle of ammonia cleaner sitting on the practice manager's desk and in an attempt to be helpful, she poured some into the unmarked spray bottle to top it off. Upon adding the ammonia

cleaner to the bleach, she accidentally created poisonous chloramine gas. Though the incident wasn't fatal, she experienced nausea, coughing, and throat irritation and had to leave the clinic early.

All hazardous substance containers should be clearly labeled with what they are and any handling risks. Employees should be aware that substances that aren't dangerous on their own can form deadly mixtures when combined.

Vet Tech Trips on Vacuum Cord

Vet Tech B plugged in a vacuum and used it to clean the hallway. As she was finishing, she was called to assist in an exam room and had to rush away, leaving the vacuum plugged into the wall. Vet Tech C was out walking a large dog that was being kenneled at the clinic. When Vet Tech C walked the dog back into the clinic, the dog got excited and ran down the hallway toward another canine patient, dragging Vet Tech C behind them. Although the dog was able to successfully hurdle the vacuum chord, Vet Tech C didn't see it in time, tripped, and went sprawling. She landed awkwardly and broke her finger on impact, requiring a trip to urgent care for splinting.

Distractions abound at veterinary clinics, and it's easy to leave tasks unfinished. Make sure equipment and tools are put away before moving on to your next responsibility.

Dr. D Breaks Nose in Storage Closet

Due to her tall stature, Dr. D was almost always the employee asked to retrieve or place items on the top shelf of the practice's storage closet. Though she did so in a joking manner, Dr. D asked several times why other employees weren't able to grab a stool and store or grab items for themselves. One day, the practice manager asked Dr. D to retrieve a heavy box of cat food cans. The box was heavier than Dr. D expected, and while balancing on her tiptoes to grab the box, she lost her grip and the box slid directly into her face. Dr. D had to be rushed to urgent care and treated for a broken nose, and also required extensive follow-up care.

Giving one employee a disproportionate share of manual tasks increases their risk of injury. While it might be easier for a tall employee to reach a high shelf or for a strong employee to lift large dogs, the work should be divvied up equally to avoid straining individual staff members.

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