



Accident Investigations

Why Investigations Are Important

The primary objective of an accident investigation is to learn the cause of an incident in order to prevent similar injuries from happening in the future. Factors such as work environment, job constraints, traffic conditions and worker experience can all be contributing factors and should be examined to determine what role each had in causing an incident.

What is an Incident Investigation?

- An organized and planned collection of the facts
- Determining the “who, what, where and when”
- Developing a remedy to correct the unsafe condition, act or work practice
- What it’s not: a means of laying blame

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Action Plan for an Investigation

An effective incident investigation plan contains these key components:

- Written support and authority from senior management to conduct the necessary investigations
- Names of the individuals in charge of the investigations
- Means to quickly notify the investigating team
- Instructions on the use of special equipment to be worn or brought to the scene
- Incident investigation procedures
- Do we have an incident investigation report tailored to the information needs of the investigation?
- What kinds of incidents must be investigated?
- Who should investigate?
- What training should investigators have?
- Should an employee or driver review committee be involved in the process?
- Who reviews the investigation report and follows up on any observations or recommendations?

Keeping these components in mind, employers should develop and frequently practice their incident investigation plan. Employers should also answer these important questions up front regarding the incident investigation:

For commercial motor vehicles, keep in mind the following requirements for crashes, such as drug and alcohol testing, crash reports and cooperating with federal investigations:

- Maintain an “incident register” for three years after the date of each incident that includes:
 - Date of incident
 - City and state where the incident occurred
 - Driver name
 - Number of injuries
 - Number of fatalities
 - Whether hazardous materials, other than fuel, were released
- Test for drug and alcohol use when:
 - The crash involves a fatality, the driver is cited for a moving violation and there is bodily injury, or
 - The driver is cited for a moving violation and one or more vehicles had to be towed from the scene.

Conducting the Investigation

Before an injury occurs, ensure employees are aware of the expectation to report incidents and near misses. This should be reinforced on a regular basis and steps should be taken to ensure barriers to reporting, including incentives focused solely on reducing the number of crashes or injuries, have been removed.

Vehicles should have incident packets that provide space to draw out what occurred, what to say and not say at the scene of the accident, and a way to take pictures of the area.

Start at the beginning

- For motor vehicle crashes, ask if anyone was hurt and determine if police are on the way (this will vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction).
- Permit emergency response personnel (police, firefighters, etc.) to perform their duties.
- As soon as the injured are treated, isolate the accident investigation area.



Then what?

An accident investigation is a systematic effort to address some key questions — your job as an employer is to find the answers:

- What happened?
- When did it occur?
- Who was involved?
- How did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
- How can it be prevented in the future?

The last question is one of synthesis — pulling together all the answers of the previous questions into a coherent and comprehensive view of the event. While these are simple questions, the task of gaining satisfactory answers to them may not always be simple.

The challenge for the individuals conducting the investigation will be to gather and accumulate this information, of varying degrees of availability, quality and reliability, to uncover what truly happened.

For motor vehicle crashes that are too far away to physically conduct the investigation, the driver's documentation and the police report are a good starting point. Additional conversations with the driver may be needed to fill in any missing details. Weather maps, Internet maps and other reliable information can help identify any weather issues, traffic conditions or street layouts that may have played a role in the crash.

OSHA Recordkeeping

OSHA requires that injuries/illnesses must be recorded if they result in any of the following:

- Days away from work
- Restricted work
- Transfer to another job
- Medical treatment beyond first aid

Additionally, you must notify OSHA within eight hours following the death of an employee or in-patient hospitalization of three or more employees. Call your area office or the OSHA toll free number 1-800-321-6742.

The Department of Transportation (DOT) requires crashes be recorded for three years if they involve a fatality, disabled vehicle or bodily injury. Spills of hazardous materials may require a phone call to the National Response Center within 12 hours or a written report within 30 days with a follow-up report within one year (see 49 eCFR171.15 and 19 eCFR 171.16 for more details).

Other specific reporting requirements include:

- Obtain a report on every injury requiring medical treatment.
- Record each injury on the organization's accident report form.
- Prepare a supplemental occupational injuries and illnesses record on the OSHA Form BWC-100 or on the workers compensation report.
- Prepare an annual OSHA Form 300 (keeping the names of the injured private) and post this form from Feb. 1 through April 30.
- Maintain the records in the organization's file for five years.

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Writing the Investigation Report

The key to writing investigation reports is to present the facts in logical sequence, including information that appears factual but cannot be proven, while eliminating unsupported assumptions.

Analysis

- Weigh all the facts, conditions, circumstances and inferences to develop a conclusion.
- Information is not added in this section of the report.

Specific recommendations

- These are the basis for specific corrective actions to prevent additional incidents.
- Do not combine recommendations since specific recommendations permit individual assignments for corrective actions.

Conclusion

- Only information that can be supported by the analysis step is included in this section of the report.
- The conclusion is written based on the available information what is known and what is not known.

Report Writing Hints

- Write the summary after the rest of the report is completed.
- Back up the summary with facts in the body of the report.
- Use drawings to support the facts.
- Avoid using jargon unless it is needed to understand what happened.
- Record the information as you receive it — don't let it pile up.

The Importance of Recordkeeping

It's also critical that updated and accurate records be kept for each workplace accident. Helpful tips include:

- Maintain a file on each incident.
- Keep all records, purchase orders and work orders associated with each recommendation in the file.
- Close out a file only when all of the corrective actions have occurred.
- Keep the number of copies of the incident report restricted (three at the most).
- Circulate the report on a need-to-know basis, not to curiosity seekers.
- Look at a broader perspective rather than individual incidents. Is there a trend that may point to a bigger problem?

Accident investigations can provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of processes and procedures in the workplace; therefore it is important to conduct investigations in a systematic manner. Doing so promotes a consistent approach to workplace safety.

