Safety Underfoot
The three ‘antis’ that will make life safer.

The science of interaction between floor and shoe is a simple one. There are certain caveats which most people will know – ceramic may look good but is highly dangerous when wet; floors, all floors, and oil don’t mix; standing for long periods on cold concrete will damage your body; suddenly changing level by 3cm can kill you.

Health and safety considerations are now more important than ever before; not only from a ‘best practice’ and corporate social responsibility point of view but also because litigation is on the increase. These factors dictate that facilities managers and others need to take a closer look at the ways in which to remedy, repair and retrofit dangerous floor areas and thereby guarantee a safer environment for all. Fortunately there are easy cost-effective solutions to all three problems – slip-resistance, comfort underfoot and exclusion of external dirt.

ANTI-SLIP SAFETY

Slips and trips cause more trouble than anything else; in the UK the figure is about 20% of all recorded accidents. Production lines are particularly important. Here, operatives are required both to stand still and to walk up and down, so comfort and safety underfoot are essential for efficient and safe working practices. The same applies to machinery and control equipment operatives because they need to concentrate and be fully alert at all times. Spilt oil, chemicals and water can be lethal.

One solution is to use a high performance slip-resistant matting which has a deeply etched surface to provide the safe grip required while the open grid will drain away spillages. Being resilient, it will also provide comfort underfoot. These mattings are particularly easy to lay or relocate and can be cut on site to fit around benches or other obstructions.

Water is a different matter, especially in changing rooms and wet areas (in sports and leisure centres, pavilions, golf clubs, schools or wherever) where designers often get the floor surface wrong. By definition, design is driven by aesthetics but aesthetics does not count for much when your customer has slipped on those ‘pretty’ ceramic tiles and broken a leg.

Here it is vital to remove as much water as possible to retain a drier surface. Again, the most cost-effective, high performance solution is to lay slip-resistant matting – open grid matting, with raised profile underbars which help drain water away towards the floor grilles while the embossed surface remains relatively dry and highly slip resistant. For example, Heronrib, from specialist safety matting manufacturer Plastic Extruders, is very hardwearing yet comfortable to stand on, while anti-bacterial and anti-fungal additives ensure it is hygienic for bare feet.

ANTI-FATIGUE SAFETY

Tiredness is equally a safety issue, not just when driving or operating dangerous machinery but from simply standing behind a work-bench or serving customers. Work fatigue has proved to be the cause of progressive bone damage, varicose veins, poor circulation and water retention as well as back problems. As a result, the TUC is encouraging the increased option of sitting and, particularly, the wider use of high performance mattings which possess an appropriate degree of cushioning. Anything which can improve concentration and relieve body stress (while maintaining productivity) is to be applauded.

The ideal anti-fatigue matting offers important health benefits, such as comfort underfoot, good slip resistance and thermal protection from cold floors. The resilience of the matting represents the ‘bounce’ it gives to anyone standing on it and this directly affects the level of standing fatigue.

ANTI-INGRESS SAFETY

Finally, safety is also influenced by the amount of dirt which enters a building. Precautions need to be taken to reduce dirt and water coming in by judicial use of high performance entrance matting systems to scrape, clean and dry. Long gone are the days when a loose piece of coir mat was sufficient; now, it is a primary barrier, often external, and then secondary internal barriers that do the real dirty work, reducing maintenance of course but also reducing that lethal slipperiness.

Health and safety in general and floor safety in particular are no longer arbitrary knee jerk decisions – they are as vital to the performance, look and running costs of a building as they are to the performance, productivity and safety of the employee. In these heady days of potential litigation, they are also vital to the bank balance, reputation and viability of the business!