

## Conduct Incident Investigations

Done right, investigations of workplace incidents can help stop future incidents by showing where hazards exist and finding “root causes.” They usually involve identifying hazards, controls that aren’t working, and program issues. Aim to learn as much as possible about incidents and how your program could improve.

### To-Do

- Investigate all incidents, as soon as possible.
- Develop a plan for investigating incidents.
- Involve workers in investigating incidents.
- Find and correct the root causes of incidents to prevent them from causing incidents in the future.

Be sure to investigate all incidents, including:

- Injuries
- Illnesses
- Near misses (also known as close calls)

You want to figure out not only what happened, but the root causes—*what caused or allowed the incident to happen*. This is often related to a problem with your program, your organization, and/or planning.

In most cases, incidents due to “unsafe behaviors” come from a weakness in management or your program. For example, a worker who didn’t follow procedure may have felt pressured because the procedure was too complicated or it had not been communicated well. An investigation helps you understand why a person acted a certain way or failed to act.

Be prepared to start your investigation as soon as possible. People remember events most clearly right after they happen.

### Develop a plan for investigating incidents

Think through how you want the investigation to go and write down steps in an incident investigation plan. Get worker input as you develop this plan. It should include:

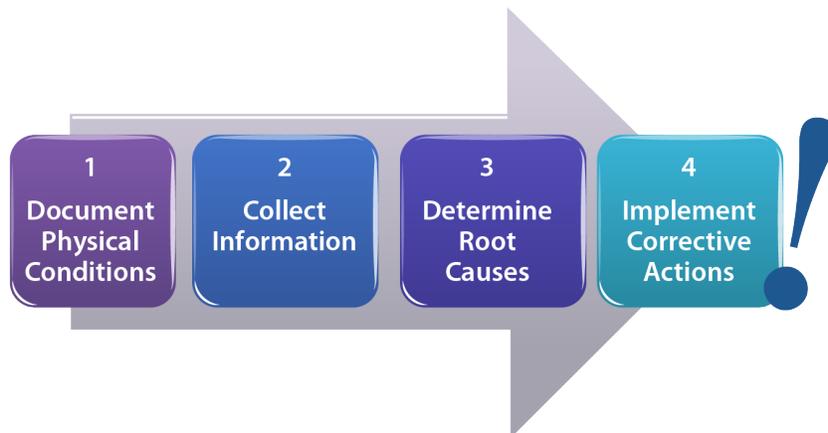
- A clear policy statement

- A statement about importance of minimizing blame (emphasize learning and improvement)
- Who will be involved and what their roles and responsibilities will be
- How people will be trained to conduct investigations
  - Stress the importance of being objective and open-minded
  - Explain that investigators should put themselves in the shoes of the workers involved
- What materials or supplies are needed
- Information about medical treatment
- Information about lines of communication
- How to document (and preserve for further investigation, if appropriate) the scene/physical conditions related to the incident
- Reporting forms and templates
- Timetables for investigation and follow-up
- Who will receive a report and take corrective action

Make sure workers are involved. They might have seen or experienced the incident—and they bring their knowledge of the work to the table. Emphasize that everyone should approach it with an open mind and not assume they already know what happened.

When you're deciding how far to take your investigation, don't just think about what *did* happen. Also consider *what might have happened*. Could there have been serious injury or death if circumstances had been slightly different? If so, you'll need to undertake an even more thorough investigation.

The figure below shows a four-step approach to incident investigation. You'll find detailed guidance for each of these steps in OSHA's [\*Incident \[Accident\] Investigations: A Guide for Employers\*](#). See below for an introduction to Step 3, "Determine Root Causes."



## Finding root causes: the “five whys”

The “five whys” is a proven tool for getting to the root causes of a problem. These are the causes that, if corrected, would keep similar problems from happening in the future.

It involves asking “why” as many times as necessary—and five is often the magic number. For example:

A worker slipped and fell to the floor, suffering a sprained ankle.

1. **Why?** There was an oily puddle on the utility room floor.
2. **Why?** Oil had seeped out from a compressor motor.
3. **Why?** An oil leak had developed but no one had noticed.
4. **Why?** The compressor was not inspected regularly.
5. **Why?** Management had decided to cut the maintenance budget and the maintenance staff was told to focus only on production equipment.

Use this method to analyze a recent incident (an injury, a close call, a report of an unsafe condition, etc.) at your facility. Ask “why?” as many times as you need to in order to uncover the root causes of the incident.

### What happened?

1. Why? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Why? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Why? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Why? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Why? \_\_\_\_\_

### Pro Tip

Appendix F of the OSHA publication [\*Incident \[Accident\] Investigations: A Guide for Employers\*](#) includes sample questions that can help incident investigators find root causes.