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How to Investigate a Workplace Injury in California: A Root Cause Guide

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An employee is hurt on your site. The ambulance leaves, the crew is shaken, and the supervisor's first instinct is to write a two-line report and get back to work. What happens in the next few hours determines whether you learn what really went wrong, whether you can prevent it from happening again, and how the event will look to a Cal/OSHA inspector, a workers' compensation adjuster, or a plaintiff's attorney a year from now. Title 8, Section 3203 requires every California employer's Injury and Illness Prevention Program to include procedures for investigating occupational injuries and illnesses. This article is about doing that investigation properly.

First Hours: Care, Reporting, and the Scene

The injured worker comes first. Provide first aid and emergency care, and make sure someone stays with the employee. Then handle the reporting clocks, because some of them are short.

- Under 8 CCR Section 342, a work-related death, or a serious injury or illness, must be reported to the nearest Cal/OSHA district office immediately, and in no case longer than eight hours after the employer knows or should have known of it. Serious injury includes any inpatient hospitalization for reasons other than observation or diagnostic testing, any amputation, loss of an eye, or serious permanent disfigurement.
- Under Labor Code Section 6409.1, the Employer's Report of Occupational Injury or Illness (Form 5020) must be filed with the claims administrator within five days of knowledge of an injury that results in lost time beyond the date of injury or requires medical treatment beyond first aid.
- The workers' compensation claim form (DWC-1) must be provided to the employee within one working day of learning of the injury.
- Recordable cases go on the Cal/OSHA Form 300 log under Section 14300, with a Form 301 completed within seven days.

While those calls are being made, secure the scene. Stop work in the area, keep people out, and do not move equipment, clean up, or repair anything until it has been documented. In a serious injury case Cal/OSHA will want to see the scene as it was, and altering it invites the inference that something was being hidden. Photograph everything from multiple distances and angles, including controls, guards, labels, lighting, housekeeping, and the positions of tools and materials. Collect the equipment involved, the PPE the employee was wearing, and any broken parts, and tag them so they are not discarded.



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Interviews: Get Them Early and Get Them Right

Memory degrades within hours, and it also reshapes itself as coworkers compare stories. Interview witnesses as soon as they are able, individually, and in a private setting away from the scene. Start with the injured employee if medically appropriate, then coworkers who saw the event, then the supervisor, and then anyone who set up the work, maintained the equipment, or assigned the task.

Rules that make interviews useful:

- Explain that the purpose is to prevent the next injury, not to assign fault. People who expect to be blamed give you very little.
- Ask open questions and let the witness tell the story in order. Then go back for details.
- Ask what usually happens, not just what happened this time. The gap between the written procedure and the normal practice is where most root causes live.
- Do not lead. “Was the guard in place?” is a leading question. “Describe the machine as you saw it” is not.
- Write the statement down in the witness’s own words, read it back, and have the witness sign and date it.

Employees have a right to talk to Cal/OSHA privately, and an employer may not discourage them from doing so. Nothing about your interviews should feel like pressure.

Root Cause Versus Blame

The most common failure in employer investigations is stopping at “employee error.” An employee reached into a running machine, so the employee was careless, so the corrective action is a written warning. That report will not prevent the next injury, and it reads badly to everyone who sees it later.

Root cause analysis asks why until the answer points at something the organization controls. Why did the employee reach in? Because the machine jammed several times a shift. Why was it jamming? Because a worn feed roller had been on the work order list for six weeks. Why was the guard easy to bypass? Because the interlock had been disabled to speed up jam clearing, and supervision knew. Why did supervision tolerate it? Because the production target left no time for proper lockout. Now the corrective actions are real: repair the roller, restore the interlock, write a jam-clearing procedure with lockout, adjust the target, and retrain.

Look systematically at each contributing category: the task as actually performed, the equipment and its maintenance history, the environment, the training of the people involved, supervision and production pressure, and whether written procedures matched reality. Most serious injuries have three or four contributing causes, and a report that finds one is usually incomplete.



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Blame has a second cost. Retaliating against an employee for reporting an injury or a safety concern is unlawful in California, and an investigation that reads as a search for someone to discipline is evidence in that kind of claim.

Corrective Actions That Actually Correct

Each root cause should map to a specific corrective action with a responsible person and a completion date. Prefer higher-order controls: eliminate the hazard, engineer it out, or guard it, before relying on procedures, training, and PPE. “Retrain all employees” is the corrective action of last resort, not first, and if it is the only one on the list the investigation probably did not go deep enough.

Track the actions to closure and verify them. If the corrective action was a new guard, photograph it installed; if it was a procedure, attach it with the training roster. Section 3203 requires timely, documented hazard correction, and an inspector returning for a follow-up will check.

Documentation That Holds Up

The investigation file should contain the incident report, dated and captioned photographs, a scene diagram with measurements, signed witness statements, equipment maintenance history, relevant training records and procedures, the root cause analysis, the corrective action plan with completion evidence, and copies of every regulatory report. Keep it factual. Separate what was observed and said from conclusions, and avoid speculation, characterizations of the employee, and legal conclusions such as “the company was not at fault.”

This record serves three audiences. Cal/OSHA will evaluate whether your IIPP was actually functioning, and a well-documented investigation with genuine corrective actions is among the strongest evidence you can offer. The workers’ compensation claims administrator needs accurate facts about mechanism of injury and witnesses. And if the injury leads to litigation, whether a serious and willful misconduct claim or a third-party suit, the file is what your attorney will build on. Consult counsel early on serious cases.

What to Do Now

- Confirm your IIPP contains a written injury investigation procedure and that supervisors have been trained on it before they need it.
- Build an investigation kit: camera, measuring tape, evidence tags, witness statement forms, a scene diagram template, and the Cal/OSHA district office phone number.
- Decide in advance who leads investigations, who is called for serious injuries, and who makes the Section 342 report.
- Adopt a root cause method and require every report to identify contributing causes in the task, equipment, environment, people, and management categories.



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- Review the last several incident reports you have on file. If they end with “employee was careless,” reopen them.

McNeil Safety Consulting conducts independent workplace injury investigations, trains supervisors in root cause analysis, and prepares documentation that stands up to Cal/OSHA review, workers’ compensation scrutiny, and litigation. If you have an injury to investigate or a program that has never been tested, call **(626) 546-9384** or learn more about our [workplace injury investigation services](#).

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