

Safety First

You can't get around in a department store or mall without riding the escalator -- and doing it the wrong way can cause injuries

Protect your kids -- and yourself -- from

The holiday
shopping danger

Who do you think gets injured most frequently on escalators? If you're like most people, you answered, "kids." But surprisingly, grownups are at risk too, account for 65 percent of the estimated 7,300 escalator accidents that occur each year, according to a recent study by the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC).

"Pinches and scrapes are the most common injuries," says New York City pediatrician Shari L. Platt, M.D., who co-authored a study on escalator accidents. "But escalators can also cause bone fractures as well as tendon and nerve lacerations."

The biggest reason for all these injuries? "People tend to get hurt when they don't use escalators the way they were designed to be used," says Ray Lapierre, executive director of the Elevator Escalator Safety Foundation. But these accidents can be avoided, he says, if we make a point of:

Stressing to kids how important it is to use the escalator properly. I've seen kids roughhousing or riding backward or trying to walk up a down escalator -- or down an up one." says Minneapolis safety expert Kevin Drew. "It horrifies me when I see them doing this because it's so danger."

Never taking strollers onto escalators. "Harried parents are often in such a rush they try to save a minute by taking their kids on the escalator in their strollers instead of detouring to the elevator," says Drew.

But "the weight of the stroller will unbalance you and put you -- and your baby -- at risk of falling," says Lapierre.

Not resting your handbag, parcels or body weight on the handrail. "The handrail and steps are designed to move at the same rate to help people keep their balance," says Lapierre. But putting too much weight on the rail may slow it down and pull you off balance.

Holding on to the handrail gently until you are safely off the escalator. This is especially important for elderly people, whose sense of balance and depth perception are not strong, says Lapierre.

-- Barbara Smalley

SOME EXTRA PRECAUTIONS FOR KIDS

To keep your kids safe, experts recommend:

Tying all shoelaces and drawstrings before kids get on an escalator.
Lifting kids age five and under off the escalator at the end. "Kids this young often become disoriented at the end of escalator ride watching the stairs going under the landing -- and many lack the motor skills to time getting off safely."