



Risk Management *Tips*

Organization Sued for Serious Injuries from Falling Tree Branch

No director wants to see a headline like that associated with their organization. After severe storms, many facilities will find damage caused by fallen trees and branches. This may be especially true in the Northeast and other portions of the country that experience extreme snowfalls. While primary focus will be on cleaning up debris left behind, organizations need to consider having a proactive tree maintenance program in place to reduce potential hazards associated with weakened tree branches and diseased trees.



Although a tree branch may appear small, it can easily weigh 50 pounds or more. A 50-pound object falling from a height of 10 feet or higher can easily cause significant damage, injury, or death to whatever it strikes in its path.

If you have experienced extreme weather conditions, take precautions to reduce hazards associated with damaged trees. Contact a certified arborist to inspect trees near cabins, dining halls, and other structures where children are active or involved in climbing activities.

Additional insight on recognizing hazardous tree defects is offered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) www.treesearch.fs.fed.us/pubs/10927. Following are excerpts from the publication, identifying problem areas to look for:

- **Dead wood**

Dead trees and large dead branches must be removed immediately! Dead trees and branches are unpredictable and can break and fall at any time. Dead branches and tree tops that are already broken off (“hangers” or “widow makers”) are especially dangerous!

- **Cracks**

Cracks are extremely dangerous because they indicate that the tree is already failing.

- **Weak Branch Unions**

Weak branch unions are places where branches are not strongly attached to the tree. A weak union occurs when two or more similarly-sized, usually upright branches grow so closely together that bark grows between the branches, inside the union. Trees with a tendency to form upright branches, such as elm and maple, often produce weak branch unions.

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- **Decay**

Decaying trees can be prone to failure, but the presence of decay itself, does not indicate that the tree is hazardous. Advanced decay, i.e., wood that is soft, punky, or crumbly, or a cavity where the wood is missing can create a serious hazard. Evidence of fungal activity including mushrooms, conks, and brackets growing on root flares, stems, or branches is an indicator of advanced decay.

Evaluating the safety of a decaying tree is usually best left to trained arborists.

- **Root Problems**

Trees with root problems may blow over in wind storms. They may even fall without warning in summer when burdened with the weight of the tree's leaves.

Soil mounding, twig dieback, dead wood in the crown, and off-color or smaller than normal leaves are symptoms often associated with root problems. Because most defective roots are underground and out of sight, aboveground symptoms may serve as the best warning.

- **Poor Tree Architecture**

Poor architecture is a growth pattern that indicates weakness or structural imbalance. Trees with strange shapes are interesting to look at, but may be structurally defective. Poor architecture often arises after many years of damage from storms, unusual growing conditions, improper pruning, topping, and other damage.

A leaning tree may be a hazard. Because not all leaning trees are dangerous, any leaning tree of concern should be examined by a professional arborist.

- **Multiple Defects**

The recognition of multiple defects in a tree is critical when evaluating the tree's potential to fail. Multiple defects that are touching or are close to one another should be carefully examined. If more than one defect occurs on the tree's main stem, you should assume that the tree is extremely hazardous.

You can learn more about hazardous defects in trees and corrective actions you can take to mitigate these hazards from the USDA Forest Service @ www.treesearch.fs.fed.us/pubs/10927 .



If you have a safety or risk management question or a suggestion for a topic, please contact Markel's Risk Management Department at safety1st@markelcorp.com.