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FOCUS *on* Construction

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Falls in Construction

How long does it take to change your life? An instant, a second, a moment in time!

Every year more construction workers die by falling on the job than from any other cause. And all it takes for these falls to occur is an instant, a second, a moment in time.

Ever hear, or even say, something like this: “I was only going to be out there for two minutes!” **The wrong decision made for even the smallest task at heights can be life changing**.

What Can Be Done About It?

First, realize that fall hazards are everywhere in construction. When entering a new work area and before beginning work, size up the scene. Look for situations in which a slip, misstep, trip, or even a brief loss of balance could trigger a fall. Check and verify that protective systems are in place before putting yourself in a space where any of these triggers exist. Never assume that all triggering situations have been controlled, or even identified, by someone else.

Let’s take a look at a few common conditions in construction.

Roof Work

On a flat or low-sloped roof, the greatest hazards are at the edges. These edges may not be only at the perimeter of the building but could be on any roof face or opening. Some indication that the leading edge is near should always be in place. This could be in the form of a guardrail or warning line. Each has a different purpose, but both are designed to keep workers away from areas that pose the greatest risk for serious falls. If the work requires moving outside this boundary, another means of protection is required. That could come in the form of personal fall-arrest systems, perimeter netting, or a safety monitor — someone who constantly watches the work and warns when the edge is approached.

On a steep-sloped roof, guardrails, safety nets, or personal fall-arrest systems are needed, as the warning line and monitor are no longer adequate.

Supported Scaffolding

Temporary work platforms are another source of risk in working at heights, and some of the most serious risks involve the method used to reach the working level. Access the scaffold only with devices intended for that purpose. Stair towers, either within the working scaffold or attached on the outside, are among the best access devices. Fixed ladders (attached to the side of the scaffold), extension ladders, or ladders built into the scaffold frame itself can also be used. Make certain that what you climb to reach the working level of a scaffold was designed and installed for that purpose.

The scaffold working level should have guardrails in place on all open sides. Scaffold user training should cover how to recognize fall hazards. Each time you access a scaffold, look for conditions that could cause a fall. If you find them, leave the scaffold and report the problems for repair.

Portable Ladders

The most widely used equipment to access work at heights is often the most misused. Before deciding to use a ladder, follow some simple safety procedures:

Determine that a ladder is the best option for reaching the work.

- Alternatives to ladders should be considered for long-duration, heavy, or complex tasks.

continued on next page

Determine what ladder (type and size) is the best fit for the task.

- The type selected should provide easy access to the work space and plenty of stability for the duration of the task.
- The size selected should enable you to get as close as possible to the work area without having to climb the top two rungs or steps of the ladder.

Select and prepare the space in which the ladder will be used.

- A solid, level surface away from equipment movement
- Nothing on the ground around the ladder (6-foot radius)

Plan the work to:

- Allow three points of contact with the ladder when climbing up and down; tools and supplies should be on a work belt or hand line.
- Keep your belt buckle between the ladder side rails:
  - Position the ladder so that you can perform the work while facing the ladder with your hands in front of your body — climb down and move the ladder when this is not possible.

Look at the ladder while climbing up and down, and look down at your feet before starting to climb down.

How long does it take to make the right decision about fall protection? An instant, a second, a moment in time!

A national campaign to raise awareness about how to prevent falls in construction was recently launched. OSHA, NIOSH, state governments, private industries, trade associations, academia, and professional and labor organizations are coming together to focus on the three major types of fatal falls: falls from roofs, falls from ladders, and falls from scaffolds. For more information, please visit www.OSHA.gov/stopfalls/.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

LC 5350 — Working at Heights: Fall Protection Series
LC 5442 — Guidelines for Selecting a Fall Arrest Anchorage System
LC 943 — Scaffold and Work Platforms
LC 858 — Portable Ladders
LC 868 — Ladders

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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