

The logo for Sedgwick, featuring the word "sedgwick" in a lowercase, sans-serif font, followed by a small green square icon containing a white stylized 'S' or 'G' shape.

Ladders are common, useful tools in many workplaces, including construction sites, warehouses, offices, retail spaces and maintenance environments. While ladders may seem simple and harmless, they are involved in many workplace injuries every year. Falls from ladders can result in serious injuries such as fractures, head injuries and even fatalities. So, it is important to practice proper ladder safety which is essential for creating a safe work environment and preventing avoidable accidents. OSHA has Standards on ladder safety for General Industry (29 CFR 1910.23) and Construction (29 CFR 1926.1053).

Common Causes of Ladder Accidents

Many ladder-related injuries occur due to improper use. Common causes from improper use include using the wrong type of ladder for the task, placing ladders on unstable surfaces, climbing while carrying tools, overreaching and failing to maintain three points of contact. Additionally, lack of training and rushing to complete tasks also increase the risk of falls. Employers should take the time to train employees on these actions and how they can cause injuries.

Choosing the Right Ladder

A critical component of ladder safety is selecting the appropriate ladder for the job. There are several types of ladders, including step ladders, extension ladders, and fixed ladders, each designed for specific uses. For example, it is important to choose a ladder that is tall enough to reach the working height without standing on the top rung or step or in some cases the top two steps. Ladders must also be rated to support the worker's weight plus any tools or materials being carried. Weight ratings, often labeled as "duty ratings", should always be checked before use. Also, ladders should be made of materials suitable for the anticipated work environment. For example, nonconductive fiberglass ladders should be used when working near electrical sources, as metal ladders can conduct electricity and increase the risk of electrocution.

Inspecting Ladders Before Use

Before using a ladder, workers should perform a thorough inspection. This includes checking for cracks, dents, loose or missing rungs, damaged rails, faulty locking mechanisms as well as areas on the ladder that may cause a slip (grease, water, oils, etc.). Step ladders should open fully with spreaders locked in place, and extension ladders should have secure rope, pulleys and rung locks. Any ladder that shows signs of damage must be taken out of service immediately and repaired or replaced, otherwise, it could result in an injury.

Proper Ladder Setup

Proper ladder placement is essential for stability and for the safety of the employees using them. Ensure ladders are placed on firm, level surfaces. If a ladder must be used on uneven ground, use the appropriate leveling equipment, never use improvised solutions like bricks or boards. For extension ladders, a general rule is to place the base one foot away from the wall for every four feet of ladder height. The top of the ladder should extend at least three feet above the landing surface when used to access roofs or elevated work platforms.

Ladders should never be placed in front of doors that are not locked or guarded, as unexpected opening can cause the ladder to fall. Barricades or warning signs should be used when ladders are set up in high-traffic areas.

Safe Climbing and Working Practices

When climbing a ladder, workers should always maintain three points of contact. Three points of contact is where the employee places either two hands and one foot or two feet and one hand on the ladder at all times. It is very important to face the ladder while climbing and descending as this will help maintain balance and control. Tools and materials should be carried using either tool belts or hoisted with a rope, as ascending or descending a ladder while holding equipment can result in a fall. Finally, never have more than one person on a ladder as this could stress the maximum capacity of the ladder and could result in instability, unless the ladder is designed for multiple users.

Training and Awareness

Effective ladder safety requires proper training and reinforcement. Employees should be trained on items such as ladder selection, inspection, setup and safe use. Regular safety talks and refresher training are great ways to keep safety at the forefront of workers' minds.

Employers also play a key role in ladder safety by setting clear expectations, correcting unsafe behaviors consistently and ensuring ladders are used appropriately.

Conclusion

Ladder safety is a critical component of workplace safety and should never be overlooked. By choosing the right ladder, inspecting it before use, setting it up correctly and following safe climbing practices, workers can significantly reduce the risk of falls and injuries. Employers and employees share responsibility for ensuring ladder safety through proper training, awareness and adherence to safety guidelines. Taking the time to use ladders safely protects not only individual workers but also the overall health and productivity of the workplace.

If you would like to know more about Sedgwick's safety services or would like to schedule a confidential consultation, please contact Andy Sawan at andrew.sawan@sedgwick.com or 330-819-4728.