Are You Using Your Fall Protection Equipment Correctly?

What’s at Stake

In the US more than 15,000 people die each year from falls, placing falls second only to motor vehicle collisions as the leading cause of accidental death. In Canada, more than 1,800 people die as a result of falling each year. And across North America, tens of thousands of workers are injured in falls every year, with many of these incidents occurring from a height where fall protection measures should have been taken but weren’t.

What’s the Danger

When you work off the ground, you need equipment to prevent falls and to protect you if you do fall. And you need training to properly choose, use and maintain that equipment. Yet, according to one study, about one-third of workers who are wearing harnesses don’t have the leg straps attached. And half the people who die from falls have their harnesses on but not attached to anchor points.

Example

A 19-year-old male construction worker fell from the roof of a five-story building through an opening of an elevator shaft to the concrete floor of the basement below. The opening had been covered with a loose metal roof curb, but there was no marking indicating the open shaft.

The worker, in anticipation of an approaching storm, was cleaning up loose materials on the roof. He lifted the roof curb and was pushing it away from himself when he stepped into the opening and fell to the concrete floor. He was transported to a local hospital, where he was pronounced dead. Investigators found that the young man had been wearing a fall harness and lanyard, but it

was not tied off.

How to Protect Yourself

Fall protection includes fall prevention equipment such as guardrails, toe-boards and hole covers, as well as protection equipment, such as safety nets and personal fall arrest systems (PFAS). PFAS may consist of a body harness, a lanyard with a shock absorber and a lifeline attached to an anchorage point. PFAS and safety nets are the least preferable and most misused type of fall protection. They don’t prevent you from falling; all they do is prevent you from getting hurt or killed by hitting the ground—that is, if you’re using them correctly.

If your job requires you to work above ground:

- Choose the appropriate fall protection. Be sure it’s right for the task, fits properly and is in good condition;
- Inspect the fall protection equipment and devices, such as guardrails and tie-off points, before and after each use. Any damage can make the equipment useless in a fall and must be thrown away. And anytime a PFAS is subjected to a fall, it must be taken out of service.
- Carefully follow all the procedures you learned in your training for anchoring and tying off.
- Check that skylights, floor holes, open shafts and riser penetrations are protected by sturdy guardrails or covers.
- Contact your supervisor if you see fall hazards. Do not work until unsafe conditions have been corrected.

Final Word

When using fall protection equipment, be sure you fully understand its use and its limitations. It takes only a second to fall. But the serious injury that results—if you even survive—can change your life forever.