Look Up for Overhead Dangers

What’s at Stake?

Some of the worst hazards in any work area are the ones you don’t see – because they’re above you. What’s at stake is your life, and there are two basic ways you could lose it: electrocution or falling objects.

What’s the Danger?

Overhead electrical power lines have caused instant death when people accidentally touch them with ladders, scaffolds, poles, pipes, vehicles and vehicle loads. These accidents involve both high and low voltage current.

The other danger above you is simply due to gravity. Materials or tools can fall from work platforms or shelves. Even a small object can pick up enough speed to crack a skull. Loads lifted by a forklift or crane are risky to walk under.

How to Protect Yourself

First, let’s review avoiding contact with overhead electricity such as power lines:

- Before working near a power line, call the power company to deenergize the line or have the lines guarded.
- Follow the safety regulations for working around power lines. This includes keeping a specific distance from power lines of certain voltages. Why? Because the power can arc through the air as it seeks the shortest route to the ground.
- Use a signal person to direct the operator of a crane or another piece of heavy equipment. This person stands a safe distance away and can warn the operator if the crane is getting too close to a line.

- Check for overhead electrical hazards when moving scaffolds and other objects extended high into the air.

Overhead electrical hazards also exist when doing home projects. Rooftop work such as installing a satellite receiver dish or replacing shingles can put you dangerously close to power cables.

- Watch for electrical connections under the eaves when painting or doing renovations.
- Look for fallen or sagging power lines at vehicle accidents and remember, a severed/fallen line can still be energized and deadly.
- Power lines can also be knocked down in a storm. Be careful; some power lines can be buried under snow.
- Keep trees and power lines apart. If a tree grows too close to a line, call a tree-trimming expert to shut off the power and trim it.
- Don’t forget indoor electrical installations. Touching a light fixture with a metal ladder is easily done and can be fatal.

Protect yourself and your co-workers from falling objects:

- Wear your hard hat. It’s made to protect you from falling objects and certain hard hats give some protection against electrical hazards.
- Get the advice of your safety supervisor to choose the right head protection and replace a hard hat that’s taken a hit.
- Store materials safely. Don’t place heavy objects out of sight in a high location where they could be pulled down accidently.
- Practice good housekeeping when working on elevated platforms to prevent materials from falling.
- Place items where they won’t slide, be knocked or kicked off the platform.
- Use toe boards, kick guards and screens around elevated work platforms to catch any items which might fall.
- Don’t walk under these elevated work areas on or off the job – in building construction along a street, for example.
- Observe flagging and “off-limits” signs.

- Lastly, don’t walk or stand under elevated loads.

Final Word

Use your head to avoid hazards over your head. Take care not to become entangled with overhead power lines or electrical installations. Use safe work practices to prevent objects falling from above.