Step It Up on Ladder Safety

If you think fatal falls happen only to construction workers swinging off skyscrapers, think again. Because ladder use is so common, many workers take ladder safety for granted, and do not take the appropriate precautions.

What's at Stake

Falls are the second leading cause of workplace deaths. The largest percentage of workplace fall deaths were falls from ladders (according to 2009 statistics). Falls are the greatest cause of fatalities in construction; 50% of falls over 11 feet result in fatalities. (Since this is an average, some falls under 11 feet are fatal.). It takes one second to fall 16 feet.

Remember, your odds of a fatal or serious ladder accident are especially high if you work in construction. It might seem like overkill at times, but you must follow proper safety procedures when using ladders. Additionally, these ladders need to be designed, constructed, used and maintained safely. The idea is to err on the side of overkill rather than workers killed.

What Could Go Wrong

The 51-year-old maintenance tech was preparing to modify a chemical line in a room where food processing equipment was cleaned and sanitized.

To reach the line, he had to climb a fixed ladder to a catwalk. The 2.5-inch (6.3-centimeter) stainless steel line was located about 40 inches (one meter) above the catwalk level, and directly overhead for a person at the top of the ladder. As he reached the top, the worker hit his head on the pipe. He slid down the ladder. The worker fell backwards from the base and struck his head on the concrete floor. He died about five hours later in a hospital.

How to Protect Yourself

Protect yourself by maintaining 3 points of contact with the ladder at all times. To keep your hands free for climbing, secure tools in a tool belt around your waist and hoist larger tools in an approved container after you have reached your work site. Carrying heavy or bulky objects up a ladder can cause you to lose your grip and balance. Ensure that the ladder in use comfortably supports your weight as well as the tools and equipment you're using. Wear the appropriate PPE if conditions call for PPE.

Avoid work from the top two rungs, steps or cleats or bucket/pail shelf of a portable ladder unless the manufacturer's says it's safe to do so. Furthermore, do not splice, lash or tape ladders together to make them longer. Placing ladders in front of or against a door is dangerous unless the door is locked or otherwise guarded. Allow only one person at a time on the ladder. Finally, do not use ladders that have damages or defects.

To protect yourself, focus on ladder maintenance. Ensure… the joint between the steps and side rails is tight, hardware and fittings are securely attached, movable parts operate freely without binding or undue play, metal bearings of locks, wheels, pulleys, etc., are frequently lubricated. Finally, inspect and repair ladders frequently. Mark broken ladders with a signage.

Final Word

Ladders are one of the most commonly used pieces of equipment in almost any work environment. Heed the horror stories. Take ladder safety seriously.