TOOLBOX TALK
NO.30

Safe use of Ladders

The law says that ladders can be used for work at height when a risk assessment has shown that using equipment offering a higher level of fall protection is not justified because of the low risk and short duration of use; or there are existing workplace features which cannot be altered.

Short duration is not the deciding factor in establishing whether an activity is acceptable or not – you should have first considered the risk. As a guide, if your task would require staying up a leaning ladder or stepladder for more than 30 minutes at a time, it is recommended that you consider alternative equipment.

You should only use ladders in situations where they can be used safely, e.g. where the ladder will be level and stable, and where it's reasonably practicable to do so, the ladder can be secured.

Who can use a ladder at work?

1. To use a ladder you need to be competent, i.e. have had instruction and understand how to use the equipment safely.
2. Appropriate training can help. If you are being trained, you should work under the supervision of somebody who can perform the task competently. Training can often take place on the job.
3. Check your ladder before you use it
4. Before starting a task, you should always carry out a 'pre-use' check to spot any obvious visual defects to make sure the ladder is safe to use.
5. A pre-use check should be carried out:
   by the user; at the beginning of the working day; after something has changed, e.g. a ladder has been dropped or moved from a dirty area to a clean area (check the state or condition of the feet).

Check the stiles (upright or verticals) – make sure they are not bent or damaged, as the ladder could buckle or collapse.
Check the feet – if they are missing, worn or damaged the ladder could slip. Also check ladder feet when moving from soft/dirty ground (e.g. dug soil, loose sand/ stone, a dirty workshop) to a smooth, solid surface (e.g. paving slabs), to make sure the foot material and not the dirt (e.g. soil, chippings or embedded stones) is making contact with the ground.
Check the rungs – if they are bent, worn, missing or loose the ladder could fail.
Check any locking mechanisms – if they are bent or the fixings are worn or damaged the ladder could collapse. Ensure any locking bars are engaged.
Check the stepladder platform – if it is split or buckled the ladder could become unstable or collapse.
Check the steps or treads on stepladders – if they are contaminated they could be slippery; if the fixings are loose on steps, they could collapse.

If you spot any of the above defects, don't use the ladder and notify your employer. Use your ladder safely
Once you have done your 'pre-use' check, there are simple precautions that can minimise the risk of a fall.

Leaning ladders

When using a leaning ladder to carry out a task:

- only carry light materials and tools – read the manufacturers' labels on the ladder and assess the risks;
- don't overreach – make sure your belt buckle (navel) stays within the stiles;
- make sure it is long enough or high enough for the task;
- Don't overload it – consider workers' weight and the equipment or materials they are carrying before working at height.
- make sure the ladder angle is at 75° – you should use the 1 in 4 rule (i.e. 1 unit out for every 4 units up) always grip the ladder and face the ladder rungs while climbing or descending – don't slide down the stiles;
- don't try to move or extend ladders while standing on the rungs;
- don't work off the top three rungs, and try to make sure the ladder extends at least 1 m (three rungs) above where you are working;
- don't stand ladders on moveable objects, such as pallets, bricks, lift trucks, tower scaffolds, excavator buckets, vans, or mobile elevating work platforms;
- avoid holding items when climbing (consider using a tool belt);
- Don't work within 6 m horizontally of any overhead power line, unless it has been made dead or it is protected with insulation. Use a non-conductive ladder (e.g. fibreglass) for any electrical work; take special care when carrying ladders in the vicinity of overhead power lines.
- maintain three points of contact when climbing (this means a hand and two feet) and wherever possible at the work position;
- where you cannot maintain a handhold, other than for a brief period (e.g. to hold a nail while starting to knock it in, starting a screw etc.), you will need to take other measures to prevent a fall or reduce the consequences if one happened;
- for a leaning ladder, you should secure it (e.g. by tying the ladder to prevent it from slipping either outwards or sideways) and have a strong upper resting point, i.e. do not rest a ladder against weak upper surfaces;
- You could also use an effective stability device.
- Where possible, secure the ladder at the top and bottom or ensure the ladder is footed by a colleague.

Stepladders

When using a stepladder to carry out a task:

- check all four stepladder feet are in contact with the ground and the steps are level;
- only carry light materials and tools;
- don't overreach;
- don't stand and work on the top three steps (including a step forming the very top of the stepladder) unless there is a suitable handhold;
- ensure any locking devices are engaged;
- try to position the stepladder to face the work activity and not side on.
- try to avoid work that imposes a side loading, such as side-on drilling through solid materials (e.g. bricks or concrete);
- maintain three points of contact at the working position. This means two feet and one hand, or when both hands need to be free for a brief period, two feet and the body supported by the stepladder
- Avoid any pulling action e.g. pulling cables as this makes the steps unstable.
- Where appropriate, consider asking a colleague to foot the stepladder.