

Working at Height

Working at height is defined as:

'work in any place, including a place at or below ground level, or obtaining access to or egress from such a place, while at work, except by a staircase where, if suitable measures were not taken, a person could fall a distance likely to cause personal injury'.

The facts

- 4,526 employees suffered a specified (major) injury or were off work for over 7 days, as a result of a fall from height in 2019/20.
- In 2019/20 there were 29 fatalities from falls from a height.
- Ladders are probably the most used and misused pieces of access equipment.
- The vast majority of ladder accidents occur because the ladder is not secured at the top.
- Work at any height can cause injury; a fall from a height of just one or two steps can cause serious injury.
- Unsuitable access equipment (such as chairs and tables) can cause serious accidents even in low risk premises such as offices and schools.
- It is particularly important to ensure that contractors working on an organisation's premises (for example for roof maintenance or window cleaning) are properly controlled and do not work in a dangerous way. Permit to work systems to control and authorise works should be used.

Hierarchy of risk control

- Avoid working at height wherever possible by altering the task or the way it can be carried out.
- If this is not reasonably practicable, the next step is to use equipment or other control measures to prevent falls.
- Always consider collective fall prevention measures, such as edge protection, over personal protection, such as harnesses.
- If the potential for a fall remains, reduce the likelihood of injury by minimising the distance to fall or its consequences and always consider passive protection, such as safety netting, over active measures, such as having to clip a safety harness on to a structure.
- In lower risk premises, take account of how storage areas and high shelving or wall displays are accessed.

Guidelines to employers

- Plan, organise and supervise all work at height.
- Ensure employees are appropriately trained in safe working methods and the equipment to be used.
- Make sure all those involved are competent and trained.
- Assess the risks and ensure that appropriate work equipment is selected and used correctly.
- Manage the risks from fragile surfaces, such as thin roofing materials or skylights.
- Inspect and maintain all equipment and workplaces intended to control the risks of working at height.
- Take account of weather conditions.
- Ensure planning includes arrangements for emergencies and rescue.
- Manage risks from falling objects.

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Recommendations for employers

- Determine if the work involves a risk of a fall that could cause personal injury.
- Consider if the work can be avoided by undertaking it in a different way.
- If it must be undertaken, determine the reasonable control measures that need to be used.
- Ensure that there is a risk assessment covering the work activities.
- Devise a safe system of work (ideally written down).
- Ensure that all workers are aware of the safe system of work and are trained in correct use of the safety equipment provided.
- For high risk work, consider a permit-to-work system.
- Ensure that equipment is subject to statutory inspections at the required frequencies.
- Supervise to ensure that the work is completed in accordance with the safe system of work.
- Ensure that all workers are safe and clear of the work area before closing the job and putting premises and equipment back in service.



Legal duties

The Work at Height Regulations 2005 (as amended) apply to all work at height when there is a risk of a fall liable to cause personal injury. Duties are placed on employers, the self - employed and any person who controls the work of others (eg facilities managers or building owners who employ contractors to work at height).

Where the means of making the work at height safe involves fixing points, such as eye bolts, running wires, fixed rail etc, there are legal requirements under the Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations 1998 (LOLER) or the Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998 (PUWER), for them to be subject to be suitably inspected. In the case where people are suspended or lifted there are specific requirements for thorough examinations at no more than six monthly intervals with inspection records being retained.

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