

Norwich Union Risk Services

Ref No 5028 (v5)

February 2006

Safe Use of Ladders

Introduction

Every year there is a large number of workplace accidents involving ladders, many of which result in people being seriously injured, sometimes fatally. When a task is of short duration, there is often a temptation to take short cuts, such as using ladders as opposed to appropriate access equipment. This temptation should be strongly resisted.

Ladders, including stepladders, are used in a variety of applications in virtually all workplaces. They can be made from timber or aluminium and will vary in length. Whatever their size and shape, it must be remembered that they have been designed with a particular type of use in mind. Ordinarily, they are used as a means of access to a place of work for minor tasks such as taking readings or measurements. Many tasks for which ladders have traditionally been used in the past might be better suited to the use of a working platform, such as a tower scaffold or mobile elevated working platform.

Training and Competence

There is a general requirement under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 for employees to be trained in safe ways of working. More specifically, Regulation 5 of the Working at Height Regulations 2005 requires employee competence, and the Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998 require the employer to provide information, instruction and training for employees. The use of ladders is no exception to the above and deserves particular attention because it can be such a high risk activity. It is not only the person who is climbing the ladder that needs to be trained. All those involved in the use and maintenance of ladders need a level of training appropriate to their responsibilities.

The person in overall charge of the job needs to have a good understanding of all the issues; the person climbing the ladder needs to understand the do's and don'ts associated with ladder use; and, the person footing the ladder needs to understand the implications of their role.

Whenever training is provided, suitable means of assessment should be developed so that the appropriate behaviours are demonstrated whenever necessary. Such training should be reviewed periodically.

Use

The Work at Height Regulations 2005 contains a schedule of requirements specific to the use of ladders which include the following:

- Ladders should only be used for work at height if the risk assessment demonstrates that the use of more suitable work equipment is not justified. This means low risk and short duration use.
- Positioning of a ladder should be such that its stability during use is ensured optimum angle to minimise the risk of a ladder slipping is around 75 degrees to the horizontal, or one out for every four up).
- Any surface upon which a ladder rests should be stable, firm and conducive to safe support of the ladder and any load on it.
- Suspended ladders should be secured to prevent displacement and swinging.
- In the case of portable ladders, suitable means should be provided to prevent them slipping during use (eg securing the stiles at the upper or lower ends or by using an effective anti-slip device).
- Access ladders should be long enough to protrude above the landing sufficient to provide a firm handhold the ladder should extend 1.1m above the landing point.
- In the case of interlocking or extension ladders, their use should be prevented unless their sections can be prevented from movement whilst in use.
- Where a ladder (or run of ladders) rise a vertical distance of more than 9 metres or more above the base, there should be

- the provision of landing areas or rest platforms where reasonably practicable.
- All ladders should be used in such a way that a secure handhold and support are available.
- A good climbing technique involves use of three points of bodily contact at any given time (eg two feet and one hand) which precludes the carrying of tools and equipment up and down ladders.

Inspections/Maintenance

To help ensure that ladders remain in a safe condition, they should be made subject to pre-use checks and detailed visual inspections. Both are looking for obvious visual defects - they only differ in detail. Both can be done in-house (in fact pre-use checks should be part of a user's training). Detailed visual inspections, which should be conducted in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions, should be recorded. Ladder stability devices and other accessories should also be 'pre-use checked' and formally inspected in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.

Key Action Steps

- Carry out a risk assessment of the task.
- Ensure the ladder to be used is suitable for the job.
- Any person using or maintaining a ladder should be adequately trained. Training should extend to those who are supervising ladder use.
- The base on which the ladder is to rest should be firm and level and the upper end should be able to support the ladder and its load. The bottom of the ladder should not rest on other equipment.
- Ladders should be secured to prevent slipping and toppling. Whilst being secured at the upper end, they should be "footed" at the base.
- Ensure adequate hand hold is available above any landings or platforms.
- Do not carry up and down ladders tools and equipment.
- Do not overreach when working from a ladder.

- Ladders should be 'pre-use checked' and formally inspected in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.

References

- Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations, 1999.
- Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.
- Work at Height Regulations 2005
- Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998 ACOP and Guidance L22.
- HSE guidance INDG401 Work at Height Regulations a brief guide.
- HSE guidance INDG402 Safe Use of Ladders and Stepladders. An employer's guide.
- HSE Guidance Note GS 31: Safe Use of Ladders, Steps, and Trestles, HSE Books 1990.
- BS 1129: Portable timber ladders, steps, trestles and lightweight stagings, BSI 1990.
- BS 2037: Specification for portable aluminium ladders, steps, trestles and lightweight stagings, BSI 1994.

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Norwich Union Risk Services operates a Risk Helpline during normal business hours for the cost of a local telephone call. The telephone number is:
0845 366 66 66
www.nu-riskservices.co.uk