

# Step Up to Ladder Safety

## WHAT'S AT STAKE

If you think fatal falls happen only to construction workers swinging off skyscrapers, think again. According to the World Health Organization, the United States leads the world in ladder deaths. Each year, there are more than 300 deaths in the U.S. that are caused by falls from ladders. Because ladder use is so common, many workers take ladder safety for granted and do not take the appropriate precautions.

## WHAT'S THE DANGER

Falls are the second leading cause of workplace deaths. According to 2009 statistics, the largest percentage of workplace fall deaths involved falls from ladders. Falls are the greatest cause of fatalities in construction; 50 percent of falls over 11 feet (3.35 meters) result in fatalities. It takes just one second to fall 16 feet (nearly five meters). Even falls from much lower heights can be fatal depending on how and where a worker lands. Remember, your odds of a fatal or serious ladder incident 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 extreme caution rather than experience a fatality.

## EXAMPLE

A 5'11", 35 year-old hotel employee was tasked with washing the windows of a hotel lobby before a big convention. The highest windows would be at maximum 25' off the ground. Rather than take the extension ladder, the employee grabbed a 15' step ladder and figured that with his height and arm reach he would be able to reach as far as need be for the job. As he got to the highest windows he realized that the tops were just out of reach. Rather than return to the storeroom and retrieve the extension ladder, he stepped up to the top rung and stretched as far as he could. He lost his balance and fell 15' onto the concrete sidewalk below. He died about 5 hours later at the hospital.

## HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Here are some tips on how to protect yourself while using a ladder on the job:

- Maintain three points of contact (two feet and one hand or two hands and one foot) with the ladder at all times.
- Secure tools in a tool belt around your waist and hoist larger tools in an approved container after you have reached your work site to keep your hands free for climbing.
- Ensure that the ladder in use can support your weight and the weight of any tools and equipment you're using. Use extreme caution when carrying heavy or bulky objects up a ladder as they can cause you to lose your grip and balance.
- Wear the appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) if conditions call for it.
- Never stand on the top rung of a ladder unless it was designed for that purpose.
- Never splice, lash or tape ladders together to make them longer.
- Unless it is locked and guarded, never place a ladder in front of a door.
- Only one person on the ladder at a time.
- Never use ladders that have damage or defects.
- Focus on ladder maintenance. Ensure that the joint between the steps and side rails is tight, hardware and fittings are securely attached, movable parts operate freely without binding or undue plays, and metal bearings of locks, wheels, pulleys, etc., are frequently lubricated. Inspect and repair ladders frequently. Mark broken ladders with a sign stating "Defective. Do not use."

## FINAL WORD

Ladder safety should be taken seriously as they are one of the most commonly used pieces of equipment in almost any work environment. Heed the warnings and don't put yourself in unnecessary danger!

