

Step by step

By Don Hauka

From small corner grocery stores to the largest manufacturing facilities and everything in between, almost every workplace has a ladder of some kind. Here are the top five things workers need to know about safe ladder use.

Used correctly, a ladder can elevate you and help get the job done safely. But improper procedures, set-up, and use can lead to serious injury or death. From 2012 to 2016, six workers died and there were 4,920 accepted time-loss claims — including 1,634 serious injuries — as a result of falls from ladders across all industries in B.C.

Mark Harper, a WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer based in Kamloops, has observed just about every way a ladder can be set up and used incorrectly, from being set up in the back of a pickup truck to being perched precariously on the top of a fully-extended forklift. But improper use isn't always so glaringly obvious.

“An accident from a ladder is usually a combination of mistakes or errors,” says Harper. “In a lot of cases, improper ladder use starts with not choosing the correct equipment.”

Right ladder for the job

The first thing workers and employers have to ask themselves is whether a ladder is the right piece of equipment to use for the job. In some cases, a work platform or scaffolding may be more appropriate and should be used where practical. Often, ladders are used to access upper floors and similar areas in construction when staircases could be practicably installed.

If a ladder is appropriate, then it's crucial to choose the right ladder for the work to be performed.

“You have to take into account the maximum load-bearing capacity of the ladder, which must account for your weight, your tool belt, and other equipment and tools in use,” says Harper. “We often see very low grades of ladders in use, and on many occasions they're being overloaded.”

Even if it has adequate load capacity, carrying heavy or bulky objects while climbing up or down a ladder is unsafe. So is working from the top two rungs of the ladder or having more than one worker on a ladder at once.

Harper says inexperienced workers who don't use ladders often are most at risk for injury. Proper

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training is essential, whether you're a grocery store clerk using a step ladder or a window washer working on a 40-foot extension ladder.

Five steps to ladder safety

These five tips are a step-by-step guide to ladder-safety essentials:

- 1 Ensure that a ladder is the correct piece of equipment to use for the work to be performed. Work platforms, scaffolding or a staircase may be more appropriate.
- 2 Make sure the ladder you've selected is the appropriate type for the job, in good working condition with sufficient load-bearing capacity, and long enough to extend one metre above the upper landing.
- 3 Set up the ladder correctly and place it on a firm, level surface. When working outside, take steps to mitigate the hazards posed by slippery/uneven surfaces, wind, rain, and snow.
- 4 Always maintain three points of contact when climbing a ladder (i.e. two hands and one foot or one hand and two feet).


- 5 Check to see if the ladder is secured properly prior to use. Tie it off, ensure it's cleated, and always have a secure base.

Harper says another key safety tip is to have your weight directly overtop of the ladder. “That's where we see people having serious falls and serious injuries — overextending, leaning over the sides of a ladder, not having your weight directly overtop of it, is what kicks out the ladder,” he says.

Resources that can help

WorkSafeBC has resources that can help you and your team work safely around ladders, stepladders, and scaffolds. These include six new ladder safety videos available on [YouTube](#), and the following resources available on [worksafebc.com](#):

- The [Ladder Safety Series](#)
- The [Manufactured Scaffolding](#) reference sheet
- The [Is This the Right Tool for the Job? Stepladder Safety in Construction](#) toolbox meeting guide 🗣️

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