



Head case



By Lynn Welburn

So you think you know everything about hard hat safety? Think again. Wearing the right one — all the time — will let you do just that.

Just because hard hats make sense, doesn't mean everyone has the sense to wear them properly. As WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer Ken Kirby says: "Hard hats are one of the top basic safety items on many jobsites. But a hard hat only works when it's in place. So wear a chin strap!"

Historically, workers have been known to object to wearing hard hats for religious reasons, while other workers might "forget" to wear their hard hats on occasion, or set them aside on coffee breaks, or fail to replace them when they're no longer useful. Regardless of the exceptions, the rules for hard hat use are clear. Under the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation, "safety headgear must be worn by a worker in any work area where there is a danger of head injury from falling, flying or thrown objects, or other harmful contacts."

According to Kirby, hard hat maintenance is just as important. "After work boots, hard hats are probably the most common pieces of safety apparel," he says. "You need to look after them, not leave them lying in the sun, or let them go bouncing around

in the truck. You need to keep them scratch-free and follow the manufacturer's instructions about when to replace them."

Hard hats are not only for those in forestry, construction, and warehousing jobs. More people in traffic control, for example, are keeping their heads when it comes to protective gear. Marnee Klintworth has worked as a certified flagger for nearly two years, after being downsized out of her health care job where she saw people hospitalized with work-related head injuries. She works at the busy construction site that takes up most of a city block that once housed the historic Woodward building in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

"Things are always falling or flying around on a job site: gravel, tools, all kinds of things," Klintworth says. "Hard hats are one sure way to keep yourself safe."

Hard hat do's and don'ts — the basics

Grant McMillan, president of the Council of Construction Associations, who has worn a hard hat for nearly three decades

Hard hats – courtesy of Hazmasters in Burnaby – come in a wide variety of colours, shapes, and sizes. But their most important feature is their capacity for remaining securely on workers' heads.

in a variety of jobs, suggests the following:

1. Most importantly, make sure your hat is not on the bench. Wear it and wear it correctly all day, and keep it on your head at all times. “If you’re eating in a protected lunch room you can take it off,” McMillan says. “But we suggest workers wear them at all times on site, just to be in the habit of being safe.”
2. Make sure your hat is sized and adjusted properly for a good fit.
3. Check that the webbing is in good shape and replace it when necessary.
4. Clean your hard hat and webbing regularly with soap and water to remove dust, mold, and germs, and thereby increase its lifespan.
5. Check your hard hat often for cracks, gouges, or other signs of damage. Replace it when needed. Different manufacturers suggest different replacement times, but according to McMillan: “after three years, most hats are pretty beat up and should be replaced.”

Kirby suggests testing the hat if you see signs of possible damage.

“Hold it in front of you with the crown facing your chest,” he says. “Push the two sides towards each other. If there’s damage, they won’t return to their proper shape and your hard hat might even break.”

What about personalized hard hats?

For Klintworth, hard hats with decals provide a sense of identity. Whether they show the company you work for, or designate a level of special training, such as first aid, or set you apart from fellow employees (in Klintworth’s case, a small skull decal), they provide an important function. “These decals say I’m part of this crew, that I belong on this site; it makes me feel part of the team.”

Derek Malone, sales manager for Hazmasters, is seeing more colours and decoration for hard hats come on to the market, including national flags or team logos on a membrane heat-shrunk onto the hat’s surface. “There’s a style element involved. A hard hat is something you wear every day, so people like to wear one that says something about them.”

McMillan says labels have some practical uses as well. Company ID stickers can help prevent theft from a construction site, and first aid officers’ stickers are useful if anyone is injured, while novice-worker stickers ensure they’re identifiable to more experienced workers.

What’s more, Kirby says stickers are rarely a safety issue. “Years ago, there was a concern about the impact of some glues from stickers – that they might degrade the hard hat over time. But with the glues today, it’s really not an issue anymore.”

What to look for in a hard hat

A hard hat will only protect you if you’re wearing it, so make sure it’s the right one. Malone has been wearing hard hats for 20 years – initially as a construction worker, and now, while visiting jobsites. He suggests workers consider the following:

1. Employer requirements, for example: do you need a Class E hard hat that reduces the danger of exposure to high-voltage electrical power (proof tested to 20,000 volts) when working around electricity?
2. Which of the main styles – traditional cap with a beak in the front or the hat style with a full brim – is best? If you’re out in the sun, a full brim gives better protection.
3. Do you need lateral or side protection?
4. What material should you choose? All hard hats must meet safety regulations, but some, known as welders’ hats, may be lighter or offer more heat resistance.
5. Do you need a chin strap or hearing protection?
6. What about personal preferences? Try a few different hard hats on. Various kinds fit differently, so find the one that fits and feels best...because that’s the one you’ll wear.

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