What You Need To Know About…

Ladders in the Workplace

Ladders are so commonly used that they are often taken for granted in the workplace. And unfortunately ladder-related workplace incidents are common because workers frequently fail to apply standard hazard management disciplines and take appropriate safety precautions.

With a few basic safety principles, use of portable ladders can easily be made much safer in the workplace.

When is it appropriate to use a ladder?

A ladder should only be used as a means of access or for minor routine work. Ladders are not designed to be used as work platforms; if the task requires extended activity at height, an elevated work platform or scaffolding should be used.

Never use a ladder horizontally as a work platform – it’s not designed for it.

What are the legal requirements for ladders?

In addition to the standard requirement of HSE Act 1992 to “take all practicable steps to prevent harm”, there are a number of AS/NZS standards for various types of ladders; each standard details the requirements of a particular type of ladder. Here are some relevant standards:

- AS/NZS 1892.1:1996 Portable ladders - Metal
- AS/NZS 1892.2:1996 Portable ladders - Timber
- AS/NZS 1892.3:1996 Portable ladders - Reinforced plastic
- NZS 5233:1986 Specification for portable ladders (other than timber)
- NZS 3609:1978 Specification for timber ladders

How do you check that a ladder is in good condition and safe to use?

Make sure the ladder is right for the job you are doing, and never use a damaged ladder. Check the following key safety points:

- **Stiles** (legs / feet) – must not be bent or damaged
- **Rungs or steps** – must not be bent, loose, worn or split
- **Braces between steps and stiles or backframe** – must not be bent, loose or disconnected
- **Locking bars** – must not be damaged or missing
- **Non-slip feet** – must not be worn or missing

How do you set up a ladder safely?

- Always ask whether a ladder is the right equipment for the task – an elevated work platform or scaffolding may be more appropriate for longer tasks.
- Check that the ladder is the right height for the job – it should extend to at least one metre above the step-off point unless other handholds are provided.
- If using a step ladder, never work higher than two steps down from the top of the ladder.
Ladder Safety

1. If a step ladder is extended for use as a single ladder, always ensure the locking clips are securely in place so the hinge doesn’t bend inadvertently at the joint.

2. Ensure the base of the ladder is set up on a firm, level surface or use a secure method to ensure even distribution of weight between the stiles (and backframe if it’s a stepladder), then secure in place using a sandbag or block at the base.

3. The base of the ladder should be placed at a distance from the horizontal surface equal to ¼ the working height of the ladder – a 1:4 ratio horizontal to vertical.

4. Secure the top end of the ladder as soon as it is placed.

5. If working on a pitched roof, use a purpose-designed roof ladder.

How do you use a ladder safely?

- Use the right ladder for the job and according to manufacturer’s recommendations.
- Only one person should be on a ladder at any time.
- Anyone using the ladder should maintain three points of contact (hands and feet) at all times.
- A second person must hold the base of the ladder until someone else can secure the top end.
- Never carry a load that will prevent you from holding or grabbing the rungs with both hands. Use a carry belt or hoist loads up separately.
- Never over-reach, as you could over-balance and fall. As a guide, keep your belt buckle between the lines of the ladder stiles at all times.
- Never hang any tools or other items from the steps or rungs of a ladder – unless it is specifically designed for this purpose.
- Always remove any loose items from steps or rungs before moving the ladder.
- If the ladder encroaches onto a passage, roadway or walkway, place cones or barriers around the base to avoid inadvertent impact that could cause the climber to fall.
- If a ladder is damaged in any way, remove it from service and have it inspected and repaired.

Where do you find out more?

Height safety publications and industry-specific applications can be obtained from the OSH website (www.osh.govt.nz), including:
- Guidelines for the Prevention of Falls

For further Looking at Legislation summary sheets in this exclusive NZ Safety series, visit our Info Library on the Internet at http://www.nzsafety.co.nz/ or contact Aysha Rowe on aysha.rowe@wisnz.co.nz.