

Going Up?

Remember the Keys to Ladder Safety

Ladders create several potential hazards that your workers need to know about in order to avoid falls, injuries, and lost workdays. Our Safety Training Tips editor says that OSHA is quite specific about ladder design, inspection, and use, and has separate regulations for portable wooden ladders, portable metal ladders, and fixed ladders (29 CFR 1910.25, 1910.26, and 1910.27).



OSHA regulations describe everything from how far apart ladder rungs should be (1 foot) to specific "do's and don'ts" about working on ladders. Be sure to teach workers the three basic hazards of ladder safety:

1. **Poor condition.** If a ladder is missing parts or has parts that are not intact, it's not going to be able to support a person safely.
2. **Improper selection.** Not every ladder is right for every use.
3. **Improper use.** Ladders should not be used as platforms, scaffolds, skids, or braces.

Always inspect a ladder before use and include ladders in general safety inspections. Whether the ladder is wooden or metal, show workers how to check that:

- Steps and rungs are all in place, intact, free from grease or oil, have slip resistant surfaces, and are firmly attached.
- Support braces, bolts, and screws are all in place and tight.
- Metal parts are lubricated.
- Rope is not worn or frayed.
- Spreaders or other locking devices are in place.
- Splinters or sharp edges are removed.
- Safety feet are in place.
- Metal ladders are not dented or bent.

Workers should not try to fix ladders. If a ladder is defective or has been exposed to fire or corrosive chemicals, workers need to tag it as defective and remove it from service. Don't use it. Also make sure workers know to store ladders in dry areas with moderate temperatures and good ventilation. It's best to store them standing up, but if they must be stored lying down, support both ends and the middle so ladders won't sag or warp. Don't store anything on top of a stored ladder.

Train workers how to select the right ladder for the job. Ladders are rated by how much weight they can safely hold. The weight limits include both the worker and any equipment he or she is carrying.

- I-A means it can hold 300 pounds (heavy duty)
- I holds 250 pounds (heavy duty)
- II holds 225 pounds (medium duty)
- III holds just 200 pounds (light). These are generally not for use on the job.

Ladder length also has limits:

- A stepladder should be no more than 20 feet high.
- A one-section ladder should be no more than 30 feet.
- An extension ladder can go to 60 feet, but the sections must overlap.

Next, workers need to set up ladders properly. Give them these instructions:

- Place the ladder on a level surface; use wide boards under it if you're on soft ground.
- Set the feet so they're parallel with the surface the ladder rests against.
- Extend the ladder so there are at least 3 feet above the top support.
- Anchor the top, and either tie the bottom or have someone hold it.
- Don't rest the ladder on a window or window sash or place it in front of a door unless the door is locked or blocked.
- Position the ladder so that the distance from the ladder base to the wall is one-fourth the length of the ladder.
- Position an extension ladder before you extend it.

Lastly, make sure workers know how to work on ladders safely. They shouldn't use ladders if they have a fear of heights or a tendency toward dizziness or fainting. Then follow these guidelines:

- Only have one person on a ladder at a time.
- Wear shoes with clean, nonskid soles—not leather.
- Face the ladder while climbing up or down and hold the side rails with both hands.
- Carry tools up or down on a belt or with a rope or hoist, not in your hands.
- Work with one hand on the ladder, keeping your tools in a hanger or holder.
- Don't step on the top two stepladder steps or top four ladder rungs.
- Keep your body centered on the ladder so your belt buckle is between the side rails.
- Don't move a ladder while you're on it.
- Keep your own movements on a ladder slow and cautious.

Why It Matters

- Falls account for more than 16 percent of workplace injuries and almost 13 percent of workplace deaths. Ladders are involved in many of those accidents.
- In a recent year, there were 80 violations of the OSHA standard that requires inspection of ladders, and their withdrawal from use, if they are unsafe.

