

Working at Height

The single biggest cause of death at work · risk assessment, controls and inspection records

Work at height means work in any place where a person could fall a distance liable to cause personal injury. There is no minimum height. People are killed falling from ladders, from the back of vehicles and through fragile roofs.

Scope and limitations — read before use

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1. The hierarchy — you must work down it in order

Order	Principle	In practice
1	AVOID work at height	Assemble at ground level and lift into place. Use extendable tools from the ground. Design the need out.
2	PREVENT falls using an existing safe place	A properly guarded flat roof, a permanent platform, a scaffold with guardrails and toe boards.
3	PREVENT falls using work equipment	Tower scaffold, MEWP, podium steps. Collective protection (guardrails) before personal protection (harness).
4	MINIMISE the distance and consequences of a fall	Nets, airbags, soft landing systems, or a work restraint or fall arrest system.
5	Instruction, training and other measures	Never the only control. Training does not stop a fall.

Collective protection always beats personal protection. A guardrail protects everybody all the time without them having to do anything. A harness protects one person, only if they clip on, only to a suitable anchor, and only if you can rescue them afterwards.

2. Risk assessment

Hazard	How people are harmed	Controls that should be in place	In place? Y/N	Action
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Falls from ladders and stepladders	Overreaching, overloading, slipping, unsecured ladder	Ladders only for short-duration light work where a safer option is not justified. Secured at the top or footed. Three points of contact. Not used as a work platform.		
Falls from scaffolds	Incomplete guardrails, missing boards, unauthorised alteration	Erected by a competent person, handover certificate, guardrails and toe boards complete, inspected before first use and every 7 days, tagged.		
Falls from tower scaffolds	Erected wrongly, moved with people on, outriggers not fitted	Erected to the manufacturer's instruction by a trained person, outriggers or stabilisers fitted, never moved with anyone or anything on it.		
Falls from MEWPs	Ejection, entrapment, overturning	See the PHW MEWP VQ pack. Trained operator, harness with restraint lanyard in a boom, ground conditions checked, rescue plan.		
Falls through fragile surfaces	Rooflights, asbestos cement sheets, corroded decking	Treat every roof as fragile until proven otherwise. Barriers or covers over rooflights. Crawling boards. Signage at access points.		
Falls through openings and leading edges	Unprotected voids, stairwells, riser shafts	Physical covers fixed and marked, or guardrails. Never rely on tape alone.		
Falling objects striking people below	Tools, materials and debris from height	Toe boards, brick guards, netting, exclusion zones below, tool tethering, no throwing materials down.		
Working on or near vehicles and loads	Falls from vehicle beds and from loads	Avoid the need to climb on beds. Where unavoidable, controlled access and edge protection.		
Weather	Wind, ice and rain making surfaces and equipment unsafe	Stop criteria agreed and applied. Wind limits for MEWPs and towers.		
Rescue after a fall arrest	Suspension trauma can be fatal within minutes	A rescue plan that does not rely on calling 999 and waiting. Rehearsed.		

3. Ladder pre-use check

Every ladder, every time, before use. Takes a minute.

Check	OK	Defect
Stiles not bent, split or damaged		
Feet present, not worn, not contaminated with mud or oil		
Rungs not bent, worn, missing or loose		
Locking mechanisms engage properly (extension ladders)		

Stepladder platform and retaining bar undamaged		
No visible repairs or home-made modifications		
Clean, free of grease, wet paint or mud		
Correct class for the work (EN 131 or Class 1 industrial)		

4. Inspection records

Scaffold inspection (before first use, then every 7 days, and after anything that could affect stability)

Date	Location / scaffold ref	Inspected by (competent person)	Defects found	Action taken	Safe to use? Y/N

Access equipment register

Item and ID	Type	Location	Last inspection	Next due	Condition

Assessed by	Signature	Date	Review date
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