

Forklift and Material Handling Safety Refresher



Forklifts and other material handling equipment are essential in warehouses, manufacturing facilities, distribution centres, construction sites, and many other workplaces. While most operators receive initial training, familiarity can sometimes lead to shortcuts, complacency, or overlooked hazards. A safety refresher helps employers and workers refocus on the everyday behaviours that prevent serious injuries, property damage, and operational disruptions.

Common Forklift and Material Handling Accidents

Forklift incidents can occur quickly and may involve operators, pedestrians, stored materials, equipment, or workplace infrastructure. One of the most serious risks is a forklift tip-over, which can happen when operators turn too sharply, travel too quickly, operate on uneven surfaces, or move with an elevated or unstable load.

Other common incidents include collisions with pedestrians, shelving, doors, walls, vehicles, or other powered equipment. Workers may also be struck by falling materials when loads are improperly stacked, unsecured, damaged, or lifted beyond the equipment's capacity.

Material handling injuries are not limited to forklifts.

Manual lifting, pushing, pulling, carrying, and repetitive handling can contribute to strains, sprains, back injuries, crushed fingers, and other musculoskeletal injuries. Pinch points and caught-between hazards may also occur when workers position loads, use pallet jacks, stack materials, or work around moving equipment.

What Employers and Workers Should Look For

Routine inspections are one of the simplest ways to identify hazards before an incident occurs. Operators should check forklifts before use for problems involving brakes, steering, tires, forks, hydraulic systems, warning devices, lights, seat belts, and other safety features. Damaged equipment should be removed from service until it can be properly assessed and repaired.

The surrounding environment matters just as much as the equipment. Employers and workers should watch for damaged flooring, potholes, slippery surfaces, poor lighting, obstructed aisles, unstable shelving, blind corners, overhead hazards, and congested pedestrian areas.

Loads should also be examined before they are moved. Employees should confirm that materials are stable, properly secured, within the equipment's rated capacity, and positioned so the operator maintains adequate visibility.

PPE Remains an Important Line of Defence

Personal protective equipment cannot replace safe operating procedures, training, or hazard controls, but it provides an important additional layer of protection.

Depending on the workplace and materials being handled, appropriate PPE may include safety footwear, high-visibility clothing, gloves, hard hats, and eye protection. Steel-toed or protective footwear can reduce the severity of injuries from dropped materials, while high-visibility clothing can make pedestrians easier for forklift operators to identify.

Gloves may protect against cuts, abrasions, splinters, sharp packaging, or rough materials, but workers should ensure gloves do not introduce entanglement risks when working around moving machinery.

Employers should regularly assess whether the PPE being used continues to match the hazards present in the workplace.

Common Mistakes and How to Prevent Them

One of the most common forklift mistakes is travelling too quickly. Operators may feel pressure to move materials efficiently, but excessive speed reduces reaction time and increases the likelihood of collisions and tip-overs. Workplace speed limits should be clearly communicated and consistently enforced.

Another frequent mistake is travelling with loads raised unnecessarily. Loads should generally be kept low while the forklift is moving, improving stability and visibility.

Poor pedestrian separation is another recurring concern. Clearly marked walkways, barriers, warning signs, mirrors, horns, and established right-of-way procedures can reduce interactions between people and powered equipment.

Operators should also avoid carrying passengers unless the equipment is specifically designed for them, using forks to lift workers without an approved platform, or exceeding load capacity.

For manual material handling, common mistakes include lifting loads that are too heavy, twisting while carrying, reaching excessively, and failing to use available lifting equipment. Mechanical aids, team lifts, proper storage heights, and task redesign can significantly reduce these risks.

Keep Safe Practices Front of Mind

Forklift and material handling safety should not become a one-time training exercise. Refresher training, inspections, supervisor observations, near-miss reporting, and employee feedback can help identify unsafe habits before they result in injuries.

For OHS managers and HR directors, the goal should be to build an environment where safe material handling is part of everyday operations. Regularly reinforcing expectations, correcting shortcuts, maintaining equipment, and responding to changing workplace hazards can help prevent familiar risks from becoming serious incidents.