Ladder and Fall Protection Refresher for Canadian Workplaces

Why ladder work deserves more attention

Ladders are so familiar that they often escape the level of planning given to other work at height. A worker grabs a stepladder to change a bulb, climbs an extension ladder to inspect a roofline, or uses a portable ladder to access a mezzanine because the job “will only take a minute.” That routine feeling is exactly what makes ladder work dangerous. The task looks simple, the height may not seem dramatic, and the worker may not pause long enough to ask whether a ladder is the right equipment for the job.

Falls remain a major source of workplace injury. CCOHS notes that about 30 percent of falls are from a height, including falls from ladders, roofs, stairs, and other elevations. It also explains that fall hazards should be assessed as part of a fall prevention program, not treated as isolated events. (CCOHS) WorkSafeBC’s fall protection requirements reflect the same prevention logic by requiring fall protection where a worker could fall 3 metres or more, or where a fall from a lower height could still cause serious injury. (WorkSafeBC)

The lesson for Canadian employers is clear. Ladder use isn’t a shortcut around fall protection. It’s a work-at-height

activity that must be assessed, controlled, supervised, and refreshed regularly. When ladders become “quick job” equipment, workers and supervisors can overlook the same basic questions that would be asked before using a scaffold, lift, or fall arrest system. That’s when preventable incidents happen.

Start by asking whether a ladder is the right tool

A ladder is mainly a means of access or a short-duration work platform for light tasks. It should not become the default answer for every job above shoulder height. Before using a ladder, supervisors and workers should ask whether the task can be completed from the ground, from a scaffold, from an elevating work platform, from a properly guarded platform, or by using another method that provides a more stable working surface.

This question becomes especially important when the worker needs both hands for the task, must apply force, must handle bulky material, must work for an extended period, or must reach sideways. Those conditions increase the likelihood of losing balance. WorkSafeBC’s ladder rules state that if work can’t be done from a ladder without hazard to a worker, a work platform must be provided. They also prohibit workers from carrying heavy or bulky objects up or down a ladder if doing so makes ascent or descent unsafe. (WorkSafeBC)

A strong refresher message is that choosing a ladder is a safety decision, not a convenience decision. If the ladder creates instability, awkward posture, overreaching, poor control of tools or materials, or exposure to a greater fall distance, it’s the wrong equipment. The safest decision may be to slow the job down and use a platform, lift, or different access method rather than forcing a ladder to do work it was never meant to support.

Inspect the ladder and the work area before the climb

Every ladder should be inspected before use. This inspection doesn’t need to be complicated, but it must be deliberate. Workers should look for cracked, bent, loose, missing, oily, wet, or damaged components; worn feet; broken spreaders; damaged rungs; loose hardware; missing labels; contamination; corrosion; and signs that the ladder has been overloaded or misused. A damaged ladder should be tagged and removed from service, not leaned against a wall for the next person to discover.

Load rating also matters. CCOHS advises workers to check the load rating marked on a stepladder and ensure it covers both the worker’s weight and the weight of tools or materials being used. (CCOHS) This is often missed because workers think only about body weight, not tool belts, carried parts, materials, or equipment. In a workplace setting, supervisors should make sure workers understand which ladders are approved for which tasks and that damaged, undersized, or domestic-grade ladders aren’t quietly substituted for industrial work.

Inspection doesn’t stop with the ladder itself. A good ladder placed in a bad location is still unsafe. The surface must be firm, level, and stable. The ladder shouldn’t be set up in front of doors unless the door is locked, blocked, or guarded. It shouldn’t be placed on boxes, pallets, barrels, vehicles, furniture, or other makeshift supports. It also shouldn’t be positioned where traffic, mobile equipment, electrical hazards, floor openings, weather, poor lighting, or unstable ground can create additional risk. A ladder inspection that ignores the surrounding work area gives workers only half the protection they need.

Set-up errors often cause preventable falls

Many ladder incidents begin before the worker takes the first step. The ladder is too short, placed at the wrong angle, set on a slippery surface, positioned too far from the work, or used near an edge that increases the potential fall distance. These aren't simply "common sense" failures by individual workers. They're predictable set-up hazards that need to be addressed through training, supervision, equipment availability, and work planning.

For extension ladders, workers should use the proper angle, secure the ladder where required, ensure the ladder extends sufficiently above the landing, and maintain stable footing at the base. CCOHS warns that when working 3 metres or more above ground, a fall protection program may be necessary and workers should follow working-at-heights training that covers the safe use of fall protection devices. (CCOHS)

For stepladders, workers should fully open and lock the spreaders, face the ladder, keep their body centred, and avoid standing on the top cap or other prohibited steps. CCOHS advises choosing a stepladder about 1 metre shorter than the highest point the worker needs to reach because this provides a wider and more stable base while placing the shelf at a useful working height. (CCOHS)

The recurring theme is stability. If the worker has to stretch, twist, pull hard, reach beyond the rails, or stand too high on the ladder to complete the job, the task should stop and be reassessed. A ladder that is technically in good condition can still be unsafe when it's too short, poorly located, or unsuitable for the physical demands of the task.

Three points of contact is important, but it’s not enough

Three points of contact is an important ladder principle, but it’s often oversimplified. Workers should maintain two hands and one foot, or two feet and one hand, when climbing or descending. Tools and materials should be carried in a tool belt or hoisted, not held in the hands while climbing. CCOHS specifically advises workers not to carry objects in their hands while on a ladder and not to work from the top three rungs of a portable ladder. (CCOHS)

That principle matters, but it doesn’t make the task safe by itself. A worker may maintain three points of contact while climbing and then lose stability while performing the actual work. That’s why supervisors must look at the task, not only the climb. Does the worker need both hands? Is force required? Is the worker leaning? Is the surface uneven? Is the ladder near an edge? Is there a chance of contact with electricity? Will the task take longer than expected? These are the questions that determine whether ladder use is appropriate.

WorkSafeBC guidance notes that while performing the task, the worker should keep their centre of gravity between the side rails and generally have one hand available to hold on to the ladder or another support. It also warns against positioning a ladder near an edge, drop, or floor opening where the potential fall distance would be increased. (WorkSafeBC) That’s a useful standard for any refresher because safe ladder use is about control during the climb and during the task.

Fall protection starts with planning, not equipment

Fall protection is sometimes reduced to “wear a harness,” but that’s too narrow and can be dangerous. A harness without a proper anchor, compatible connectors, fall-clearance

calculation, rescue plan, and training can create a false sense of security. It may also leave a worker exposed to serious injury if the system doesn't function as intended.

CCOHS explains that fall protection plans must be specific to each site where workers are at heights and that there is no one-size-fits-all plan. Equipment and requirements change depending on the site, the work, and the conditions. (CCOHS) CCOHS also notes that OHS laws generally require action when a worker could fall about 3 metres, although specific requirements vary by jurisdiction and task. (CCOHS)

A refresher should reinforce the hierarchy of fall protection. Whenever possible, eliminate the need to work at height. If that's not possible, use guardrails, covers, or other passive systems. If the worker must be exposed to a fall hazard, use travel restraint to prevent the worker from reaching the edge where feasible. If fall arrest is required, ensure the worker is trained, the equipment is inspected, the anchor is suitable, the system is properly configured, and rescue can happen quickly.

Fall arrest should not be treated as the first choice when better controls can prevent the fall altogether. A worker who never reaches the fall hazard is better protected than a worker relying on equipment to stop a fall after it begins.

Training must match the jurisdiction and the work

Canadian fall protection requirements vary by jurisdiction and sector. Ontario, for example, requires workers on construction projects who use fall protection devices to complete an approved working-at-heights training program. (Ontario) Other provinces and territories have their own fall protection requirements, training expectations, and regulatory thresholds. Employers operating across Canada should not assume one generic training module satisfies every legal

requirement.

Training must also be practical. Workers need to know how to inspect ladders, choose the right ladder, set it up safely, recognize when a ladder is inappropriate, use fall protection equipment properly, understand anchor points, calculate fall clearance where relevant, report defective equipment, and stop work when conditions change. Supervisors need enough knowledge to spot unsafe ladder choices, challenge poor set-ups, verify training, and ensure the fall protection plan is actually followed.

A refresher should focus less on memorizing rules and more on decision-making. The worker should leave knowing when to say, “This ladder isn’t safe for this task,” and the supervisor should support that decision. Training that teaches rules without reinforcing judgment can leave workers technically informed but still vulnerable to pressure, shortcuts, or poor equipment choices.

Rescue planning is part of fall protection

Fall arrest systems can save a worker’s life, but they also create an immediate rescue problem. A worker suspended in a harness after a fall may need rapid retrieval and medical attention. Calling 911 may be part of the plan, but it can’t be the whole plan if emergency responders can’t reach the worker quickly, don’t have site-specific access, or aren’t familiar with the equipment and conditions.

CCOHS describes a working-at-heights rescue plan as written emergency response procedures for quickly retrieving and providing help to a worker who has fallen while using a fall protection system. (CCOHS) Employers should ensure rescue procedures are realistic for the site, equipment, height, weather, access, and available personnel. Workers should know who initiates rescue, what equipment is used, who is trained,

how communication occurs, and how the worker will be reached.

A fall protection plan that doesn’t address rescue is incomplete. A harness may stop the fall, but the rescue plan completes the control. Without a realistic rescue plan, the employer may have controlled one danger while creating another.

Refreshers should focus on real workplace failure points

The best ladder and fall protection refreshers don’t simply repeat old rules. They address the mistakes that actually show up in the workplace. That includes using ladders for tasks that require platforms, overreaching, using damaged ladders, working too high on a stepladder, placing ladders on unstable surfaces, climbing with tools in hand, ignoring weather, failing to secure extension ladders, selecting poor anchor points, using fall arrest without adequate clearance, and failing to plan rescue.

Refreshers should use examples from the organization’s own inspections, near misses, incident reports, and corrective actions. If the same ladder is repeatedly found damaged, the issue may be inspection and removal from service. If workers are using ladders instead of platforms because platforms are hard to access, the issue may be equipment availability. If workers keep climbing with materials in hand, the issue may be planning, tool transfer, staffing, schedule pressure, or supervision.

This is where OHS leaders can make training more credible. Workers don’t need abstract warnings. They need a refresher that reflects the work they actually do, the conditions they actually face, and the shortcuts that actually appear when work is rushed.

A practical supervisor field test

Supervisors can use a simple field test before ladder or fall hazard work begins. The point isn’t to create paperwork for its own sake. It’s to make sure the job has been assessed before someone leaves the ground.

The supervisor should be able to answer whether the ladder is the safest equipment for the job, whether the ladder is rated and inspected, whether the surface and location are suitable, and whether the worker can maintain stability while doing the work, not just while climbing. The supervisor should also consider whether the task is near an edge, opening, electrical hazard, traffic route, or unstable surface, and whether fall protection is required by law, by site rule, or by the risk assessment. If fall arrest is used, the supervisor should know whether the anchor is suitable, clearance is adequate, equipment is compatible, and rescue is planned.

That kind of field test is due diligence in real time. It shows that the employer is making a reasoned decision before the work begins, rather than explaining after the fact why a “quick ladder job” went wrong.

The refresher message workers should remember

A ladder is never just a ladder when someone can fall from it. It’s a work-at-height decision. The safest workers aren’t the ones who climb fastest or “make it work.” They’re the ones who stop long enough to choose the right equipment, inspect it, set it up properly, control the work area, use fall protection where required, and speak up when the task can’t be done safely.

For employers, the standard is equally clear. Provide the right equipment, train workers, supervise ladder use, plan fall protection, prepare for rescue, and act on near misses

before a serious injury proves the system was weak. Most ladder falls aren’t mysterious. They happen after a series of small decisions that made the climb more dangerous than it needed to be. A strong refresher helps workers and supervisors make those decisions differently before anyone leaves the ground.