

Ladder and Scaffold Safety Refreshers for Canadian Workplaces



Why ladder and scaffold refreshers need to be more than reminders

Ladders and scaffolds are so common that workers can start treating them as ordinary site furniture. A stepladder is pulled over for a quick task. A portable ladder is leaned against a landing because the job should only take a minute. A rolling scaffold is moved into place because it feels more stable than a ladder. A frame scaffold stays in service after a minor adjustment because everyone assumes someone else checked it. None of these moments looks dramatic, but each one can create serious fall, struck-by, collapse, or access hazards if the equipment is wrong for the task or the setup has changed.

A good refresher does not simply repeat that workers should be careful. It reminds workers and supervisors that ladders and scaffolds solve different problems and fail in different ways. A ladder is usually a short-duration access tool or light-duty work position. A scaffold is a temporary elevated work platform with a supporting structure. Both can expose workers to falls, but scaffolds also introduce platform loading, bracing, tie-in, guardrail, access, planking, stability, and

falling-object issues. That broader risk profile is why a combined refresher needs to address equipment selection first, not after someone is already standing above the ground.

Canadian guidance on fall protection supports this system view. CCOHS says fall protection planning includes selecting, assembling, maintaining, inspecting, using, and dismantling equipment such as ladders, scaffolds, platforms, and fall protection equipment, and that plans must be specific to the site and the work rather than one-size-fits-all documents. [1] The federal Labour Program also identifies ladders, scaffolding, fall-protection systems, and guardrails as equipment that must be used and maintained properly, with hazards assessed and emergency and rescue procedures implemented where required. [2] The practical point is clear: a ladder or scaffold refresher is really a refresher on working-at-heights decision-making.

The first decision is whether the equipment matches the task

Many ladder and scaffold incidents begin with the wrong access choice. Workers may use a ladder because it is faster, even when the task requires two hands, lateral reach, force, tools, material handling, or extended work at elevation. They may use a scaffold because it looks more stable, even when it has not been inspected, its wheels are not locked, guardrails are missing, or the platform is being used beyond its intended load. In both cases, the failure starts before the climb.

A ladder should not be treated as the default for every task above shoulder height. WorkSafeBC's ladder rules, for example, require portable ladders to be placed on a firm and level surface, be long enough for safe performance of the work, and be positioned and secured to maintain stability. The same rules state that if work cannot be done from a ladder without hazard to a worker, a work platform must be provided. [3] That

is a useful refresher principle across jurisdictions even though exact legal wording varies: if the worker must stretch, twist, carry bulky material, apply force, use both hands, or remain in position for an extended period, the ladder may not be the right control.

Scaffolds are not a shortcut around planning either. They can provide a better working surface, but only if they are erected, used, inspected, altered, loaded, and accessed properly. Under the federal Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations, the erection, use, dismantling, or removal of a scaffold must be carried out by or under the supervision of a qualified person, and scaffolds must have footings and supports capable of carrying likely loads without dangerous settling. [4] That requirement captures one of the most important scaffold refresher messages: workers should not treat scaffold components as adjustable convenience items that can be moved, removed, or reconfigured casually.

What ladder refreshers should reinforce

A ladder refresher should focus on the decisions workers make before and during the task. The ladder must be rated for the work, inspected before use, free from damage, long enough for the task, and appropriate for the environment. Workers should check feet, rungs, rails, spreaders, locks, labels, contamination, and signs of damage or misuse. A ladder with bent rails, missing feet, loose hardware, damaged rungs, or hidden defects should be tagged and removed from service, not placed back in the corner for the next crew.

Set-up matters as much as inspection. CCOHS advises that portable ladders be kept away from power wires, secured to prevent slipping, barricaded when used in doorways or passageways, and placed at the proper angle using the four-to-one rule, which produces a pitch of about 75 degrees. It also

advises extending the ladder at least 1 metre above the landing platform or support point, placing it on firm level footing, and securing it at the top where needed. [5] Those details should not be treated as trivia. They are the controls that turn a familiar piece of equipment into a stable access method.

The refresher should also address common ladder misuse. Workers should not carry objects in their hands while climbing, use a ladder horizontally as a scaffold plank, work from the top three rungs, place a ladder on boxes or carts, erect ladders on scaffolds or other unstable surfaces, overreach, or use ladders where another safe means of access is available and practical. [5] These rules are often known but not consistently applied because the job feels quick. A good refresher brings the discussion back to the task: can the worker maintain three points of contact while climbing, stay centred while working, control tools and materials, and complete the task without leaning or improvising?

What scaffold refreshers should reinforce

A scaffold refresher should begin with structure and authority. Workers need to know who is permitted to erect, alter, inspect, and dismantle scaffolds, and they need to understand that missing components are not minor housekeeping issues. Base plates, connections, braces, tie-ins, securing devices, planks, guardrails, mid rails, toe boards, and access points all perform a safety function. Removing or forcing components to fit can change the scaffold's stability and the protection it provides.

CCOHS scaffold guidance emphasizes several practical controls: ensure the scaffold is securely attached where required, account for increased wind effects when scaffolds are hoarded or covered, make sure planks are in good condition and

properly cleated, use all required components, and protect working levels with proper guardrails, mid rails, and toe boards. It also warns workers not to use a scaffold without guardrails, overload platforms, climb or stand on cross braces or guardrails, work during storms or high winds, or use ladders or makeshift devices on scaffolds to gain height.

Those points should be turned into site-specific discussion rather than read as a generic checklist. Which scaffolds on the site are engineered or manufacturer-specific? Who signs off before use? What happens after weather, impact, loading changes, hoarding, material storage, or trade interference? How are missing clips, removed guardrails, shifted planks, unstable footing, or overloaded platforms reported and corrected? Workers should leave the refresher knowing that scaffold safety is not just about not falling. It is also about preventing collapse, tip-over, falling materials, unstable access, and unauthorized modification.

Rolling scaffolds deserve special attention

Rolling scaffolds create their own failure pattern because they feel simple and convenient. They are often used indoors, moved frequently, and treated as less formal than larger scaffolds. That convenience can make workers overlook wheel brakes, outriggers, platform height, access, overhead hazards, floor conditions, and the temptation to move the scaffold with someone or something still on it.

CCOHS rolling scaffold guidance advises employers and workers to provide safe access and exit, secure access ladders, ensure guardrails are in place, equip wheels or castors with brakes, lock caster brakes before climbing, and secure or remove material, equipment, and personnel before moving the scaffold. It also warns against staying on the scaffold while it is being moved, leaning access ladders against rolling scaffolds,

overreaching, climbing the frame, standing on guardrails, overloading the scaffold, or using powered devices to move it. [7]

A strong refresher should make rolling scaffold rules practical. Before use, workers should ask whether the floor can support the scaffold, whether there are holes, slopes, debris, floor openings, cords, or overhead obstructions, whether the height-to-base relationship is stable, and whether the brakes and guardrails are in place. Before moving it, they should remove or secure materials, clear the route, watch for overhead hazards, and make sure no one remains on the platform unless a jurisdiction-specific safe method permits it and the required protections are in place.

Fall protection is not just a harness decision

A common weakness in ladder and scaffold refreshers is reducing fall protection to personal protective equipment. Harnesses and lanyards matter, but they are not the whole system. A harness used without a suitable anchor, proper clearance, compatible equipment, training, inspection, rescue planning, and correct task design can create a false sense of security.

CCOHS notes that OHS laws generally require action when a worker has the potential to fall about 3 metres, although exact requirements vary by jurisdiction and by the nature of the fall hazard. It also identifies controls such as fixed barriers, guardrails, opening protection, warning barriers, travel restraint, safety nets, and fall arrest systems. [1] Federal guidance similarly states that employers must identify and assess working-at-heights hazards, implement adequate controls, develop safe work procedures, provide training, and implement emergency and rescue procedures. [2]

For ladders, the refresher should emphasize that fall protection may be required when the worker is at height or when the nature of the work prevents maintaining safe contact and control. For scaffolds, the discussion should focus on guardrails, toe boards, safe access, platform completeness, fall protection during erection or alteration where required, and what workers must do if guardrails are temporarily removed for hoisting or material movement. The preferred control is preventing the fall, not merely arresting it after it begins.

Falling objects are part of the same hazard

Ladder and scaffold refreshers often focus on the worker who could fall, but elevated work also creates risk for people below. Tools, fasteners, materials, planks, debris, or dropped equipment can seriously injure workers, visitors, pedestrians, or other trades. On crowded construction sites, the risk increases when multiple trades work above and below each other, access routes pass near scaffold bases, or materials are stored on platforms that were not intended to hold them.

Scaffold refresher training should reinforce toe boards, debris control, tool lanyards where appropriate, exclusion zones, overhead protection, housekeeping, material storage limits, and communication between trades. Ladder work should also be planned so tools and materials are hoisted, carried in belts, staged safely, or handled from a more stable platform where needed. A worker climbing with a drill in one hand and material in the other is not only creating a ladder fall risk. They are also creating a dropped-object risk.

Supervisors should inspect what is happening above and below the work. If an area is open beneath scaffold work, if workers are passing under ladders, or if material is being staged at height without proper control, the job should be paused and corrected. A good refresher makes elevated work a zone-control

issue, not only a personal climbing issue.

Supervisors need a field verification role

Training workers is necessary, but ladder and scaffold safety depends heavily on supervisor verification. The supervisor should be able to see when a ladder is being used for work that requires a platform, when a scaffold has been altered, when guardrails or toe boards are missing, when a rolling scaffold is being moved incorrectly, when floor conditions are unsuitable, and when fall protection has been reduced to a harness without a complete system.

A practical supervisor check should ask whether the equipment is appropriate for the task, whether it has been inspected, whether the setup is stable, whether workers have safe access and egress, whether fall protection or guardrails are required and in place, whether materials are controlled, whether weather or wind has changed the risk, whether the scaffold has been altered since last inspection, and whether workers know who to contact if they find a defect. These questions are simple, but they convert the refresher from a classroom exercise into due diligence on the job.

The strongest refreshers also clarify stop-work authority. Workers should not have to decide between finishing a task and challenging an unsafe ladder or scaffold setup. They should know that a missing guardrail, unstable footing, damaged ladder, overloaded platform, unsecured access ladder, poor weather condition, or unauthorized scaffold change is enough to stop and ask for correction. Supervisors need to support that decision consistently, especially when schedule pressure makes shortcuts attractive.

Make the refresher site-specific

A generic ladder and scaffold refresher has limited value if it does not connect to the work being performed. A construction employer may need to focus on scaffolds, ladders, leading edges, material handling, subcontractor coordination, and changing site conditions. A maintenance employer may need to focus on portable ladders, rolling scaffolds, electrical hazards, overhead work, and after-hours tasks. A manufacturing employer may need to address fixed access ladders, mezzanines, lift-truck platforms, and contractor scaffolds used during shutdowns.

The refresher should use the employer's own inspection findings, near misses, photos, corrective actions, and common failure points. If damaged ladders keep showing up in storage rooms, the refresher should cover inspection and removal from service. If workers are using ladders on scaffolds to gain height, the refresher should address equipment selection and unauthorized modification. If scaffold components are being removed for convenience, the refresher should discuss who can alter the scaffold and what must happen before it returns to service.

The JHSC or health and safety representative should also see ladder and scaffold trends. Repeat inspection findings, near misses, worker concerns, missing components, overdue corrections, and contractor-related scaffold issues should be part of the prevention conversation. Worker participation is particularly useful because workers often know which access problems are being worked around before the formal inspection catches them.

The better refresher standard

The goal of a ladder and scaffold refresher is not to remind experienced workers of rules they already know. The goal is to

interrupt the drift that happens when familiar equipment becomes too casual. Workers and supervisors should leave with a sharper understanding of when a ladder is the wrong tool, when a scaffold must be inspected or taken out of service, when fall protection requires a full plan, when weather or site changes matter, and when a task must stop because the setup no longer controls the hazard.

Canadian employers need to treat ladders and scaffolds as part of the same working-at-heights system, but not as interchangeable equipment. Ladders demand attention to selection, angle, footing, securing, three-point contact, load, and task suitability. Scaffolds demand attention to qualified erection and alteration, platform integrity, guardrails, bracing, tie-ins, load, access, falling-object protection, and stability. Both require supervision, worker reporting, and practical training that reflects the real work.

Most serious ladder and scaffold failures are not mysterious. They usually follow visible warning signs: a rushed setup, a missing component, a damaged ladder, an overloaded platform, a moved rolling scaffold, an unstable base, a removed guardrail, an ignored near miss, or a worker who felt pressure to make the equipment work. A strong refresher helps the organization see those warnings before someone falls, something collapses, or a tool drops onto the worker below.