

# Spot The Safety Violation: Avoid this Common Step Ladder Mistake



Is this ladder the best choice for this task? What would be a safer way to do this job?



Stepladders and extension ladders aren't complicated pieces of equipment and yet instances of workers using ladders in dangerous ways are all too common. Just a quick internet search will pull up hundreds of examples of workers using ladders unsafely and taking unnecessary risks on this equipment.

For example, in this picture, a worker is standing on the top cap of a step ladder, which isn't designed to be stood or sat on by workers. Clearly, this ladder isn't tall enough for the task because even while standing on the top cap, he's on his tiptoes! The simple solution: Use a taller ladder.

Falls from ladders, even fairly short ones like the step ladder in the picture, can be very serious and even fatal:

- A grocery store worker in Ontario was arranging items on shelves while standing on the top cap of a step ladder. He lost his balance and fell to the floor, suffering a fatal head injury. The grocery store pleaded guilty to a safety violation and was fined \$80,000 [TKPL & Associates Ltd., Govt. News Release, Sept. 14, 2012].
- A worker in Saskatchewan slipped and fell off a ladder, suffering serious injuries. His employer was fined \$2,000 for an OHS violation [Frontier Glass & Door, Nov. 27, 2014].
- A worker at an Ontario construction site lost consciousness and then fell from a ladder at a height of about five feet. He sustained head injuries and died in the hospital a few days later [Jan. 7, 2016].

## STEP LADDER SAFETY TIPS

To protect workers while using step ladders on the job, first ensure that you comply with the requirements under the OHS laws for portable ladders, including both step ladders and extension ladders. And train workers who use ladders on these requirements and how to safely use this equipment. As part of such training, give them these step ladder safety tips from WorkSafeNB:

**1. Position the ladder properly.**

- Fully open the step ladder on a level surface and lock its spreader in place.
- Never use a step ladder folded up and leaning against a surface. Use an extension ladder instead.
- Ensure a proper size, type and grade of ladder is used for each task. Avoid using household ladders on job sites.
- Ensure the ladder isn't near any overhead power lines or other electrical hazards.

**2. Use a ladder that's tall enough.**

- Never climb, stand or sit on the top cap or shelf of a step ladder like the worker in the picture is doing.
- Never place the step ladder on unstable surfaces, such as buckets or scissor lifts, to gain extra height.

**3. Climb and use the ladder carefully.**

- Maintain three-point contact (i.e., one hand and two feet) with the ladder while climbing.
- Brace yourself with your free hand.
- Ensure your shoes/boots are clean and have slip-free soles.
- Always face the step ladder treads while climbing.
- Never overreach or lean to one side while using a step ladder. Always keep your shoulders within the rails.
- Never carry heavy or bulky objects that may make going up or down a ladder unsafe.
- Always wear appropriate fall protection when required.

You should also have workers inspect ladders before using them to ensure they're not damaged or otherwise unsafe (see, ladder inspection form). Using an unsafe ladder is very dangerous.

*Example:* A worker in Great Britain was servicing a delivery truck and repairing the driver's access rope for the cab when he fell from the ladder, striking his head and losing consciousness. He was placed in a medically-induced coma for two weeks; he's still struggling with ongoing complications and is unable to return to work. *The cause of the incident:* The anti-slip feet of the ladder were worn out and so the ladder was unsafe to use.

A company pleaded guilty to a safety violation and was fined £900,000. The HSE representative commented that this case was about 'companies ensuring they properly maintain their work at height equipment, and train their workers on how to inspect them and select the correct tools for the job. As this case shows, even a fall from a relatively small height can have devastating consequences' [The Volvo Group UK Ltd., HSE, Dec. 28, 2016].

Supervisors can use this step ladder safety checklist to ensure that workers

properly set up, move on and work from step ladders.