

Spot The Safety Violation: Skylights Aren't OHS Compliant Covers



What do you think happened to the bricklayer who fell through this skylight'



The OHS laws require employers to protect workers from not only falls from

heights but also falls through openings in roofs, walls, work platforms, etc. Skylights in particular pose a serious hazard because although they're covered openings, the covers can't usually support a worker's weight.

This picture from the Health and Safety Executive in Great Britain shows the aftermath of a worker's fall through a skylight on the roof of a school.

The 52-year-old bricklayer had been hired by a roofing company to carry out necessary brickwork on the roof as part of a renovation project. He'd been kneeling on the roof and, when he stood up, he fell backwards through the skylight and into the boys' bathroom two metres below. He suffered fatal head injuries as a result of the fall.

The HSE investigation found that the construction plan stated that before work was carried out, the plastic domes of all skylights had to be removed and the openings boarded over to prevent falls. But when roofers accessed the roof, they found that the domes couldn't be easily removed.

The roofing company's director visited the site on the first day to check that it'd been set up correctly. The difficulty with removing the skylights was discussed and it was decided that work could progress without any covering of the skylights.

The roofing company and the director both pleaded guilty to safety offences and were fined.

Falls through skylights are hardly unique to Great Britain'and such falls are often fatal.

Example: A worker walking backwards on a roof tripped on the flashing of a skylight and fell through it to the concrete floor below. He died from his injuries. There were no guardrails around the skylights and the skylights themselves didn't constitute a compliant protective covering over the roof openings. The employer pleaded guilty to failing to ensure that a guardrail or protective covering was used to prevent workers from falling through the skylights and was fined \$100,000 [APCO Industries Co. Ltd., ON Govt. News Release, March 21, 2013].

Conduct a Skylight Risk Assessment

In response to several incidents, the Ontario Ministry of Labour issued a hazard alert recommending that employers take certain steps to protect workers who may be exposed to the hazard of falling when working on or near skylights. Those steps include conducting a risk assessment and job hazard analysis *before* any work takes place. The assessment should answer these questions:

- Are skylights installed at the worksite'
- In what condition are the skylights'
- Can the skylights support the impact of a falling worker'
- Are the skylights suitably guarded or shielded to prevent a worker from falling through them'
- Is there space to install temporary guardrails or barriers around or over the skylights'

Take 4 Steps to Protect Workers from Falls Through Openings

Although the specific requirements in the OHS laws may vary, you should generally take the following four steps to prevent workers from falling through openings such as skylights:

Step #1: Identify hazardous openings. Start by identifying any openings in floors, roofs, walls, work platforms, etc. through which workers could fall, such as the skylights in this picture.

Step #2: Install either guardrails or coverings. The two basic safeguards for openings are guardrails and covers. Guardrails are generally the preferred method of preventing falls through openings because they're more obvious and visible than covers and are harder to remove.

If you can't use a guardrail around an opening, you must cover it and a skylight covering likely won't be adequate. The OHS laws generally require covers to be:

- Big enough to cover the whole opening;
- Securely fastened to prevent workers from easily removing them;
- Strong enough to bear weight; and
- Marked as covering an opening.

Step #3: Develop a hazardous openings policy. Create and implement a policy on hazardous openings that covers, at a minimum:

- Identification of hazardous openings;
- Determining the type of protection to be used for such openings;
- Requirements for guardrails and covers; and
- Procedures to be used when an opening's protection must be removed.

Step #4: Train workers. As with all safety policies, you should train workers on your hazardous openings policy, covering:

- General safe work procedures for working around openings;
- Installation and use of guardrails and covers; and
- Procedures to follow when a guardrail or covering must be removed.

Also, ensure that workers wear appropriate fall protection when working around or near hazardous openings.