

Spot The Safety Violation: The Leaning Tower of Pallets



If you were standing or working near this stack of pallets, how safe would you feel'



It's important to ensure that workers safely move materials, whether manually or using equipment such as forklifts. But it's also important to ensure that materials are safely stored in the workplace, too.

This picture from the US Naval Safety Center shows a 20 foot tall stack of pallets that's leaning precariously. It wouldn't take much to cause this pile of pallets to come tumbling down and strike any worker unlucky enough to be in the area.

Take 6 Steps

The OHS regulations in each jurisdiction address the safe storage of materials.

So ensure that you comply with the specific storage requirements in your jurisdiction. But you can generally take the following steps to comply with those requirements:

Step #1: Use Proper Storage Racks

Storage racks are commonly used to store materials in warehouses, distribution centres, retail stores and manufacturing plants. But if these racks are improperly installed or used, or become damaged in some way, they can endanger workers.

Example: Workers at a home improvement store in Ontario were preparing to receive a load of merchandise from a trailer backed into the store's receiving area, which had three bays. Pallets of patio doors had been placed in overhead racks in two of the bays. When one worker opened a bay door, it came into contact with a pallet of patio doors, which tipped over, fell about 11 feet and struck another worker. He suffered serious head injuries. *The cause of the incident:* the racking system hadn't been installed properly. The store pleaded guilty to a materials storage violation and was fined \$90,000 [*Home Depot of Canada Inc.*, Govt. News Release, July 22, 2014].

Use this checklist to inspect the storage racks in your workplace to ensure that they're safe.

Step #2: Ensure that Stacks of Materials Are Safe

If materials are stored in stacks or piles, such as the pallets in this picture, ensure that such stacks don't endanger workers. For example, brace, strap, cross-tie or otherwise restrain stacked materials or containers to prevent them from collapsing or falling from the pile. And ensure that stacks aren't piled to a height that could undermine their stability.

Step #3: Take Extra Care Storing Certain Materials

Certain materials, such as those that can roll or loose/bulk materials, may be subject to specific or additional storage requirements. So make sure to check your OHS regulations for such requirements and comply with them.

For example, stacks of bagged material such as soil should be stabilized or cross-tied to prevent movement. In addition, the bags should be placed with the mouths of the bags facing inwards. And you may need to step back the tiers of bags depending on the height of the stack.

Step #4: Ensure Storage Area Itself Is Safe

Also ensure that the areas around stacks, piles and storage racks are safe. For example, piles or stacks of materials shouldn't be located underneath energized electrical power lines. The aisles between racks should be wide enough for the safe operation of powered mobile equipment and kept free of obstacles. And stored materials shouldn't interfere with or block:

- Lighting;
- Ventilation;
- Doors or windows;
- Passageways or traffic lanes;

- The operation of machines;
- Sprinklers and firefighting equipment; or
- Electrical panels.

Step #5: Implement Safe Storage Rules and Practices

Create and implement rules and practices for the safe storage of materials and safe removal of those materials from storage. For example, bar workers from stacking materials too high or overloading racks beyond their safe load limits. Also, require workers to report any damage to such racks as soon as is practical and discipline them appropriately when they don't.

Example: A forklift operator drove into a rack, seriously damaging it. Luckily, no products fell off the rack. The operator didn't report the incident, which was discovered on the next shift. And he falsified documents to cover it up. He only admitted what happened when the employer confronted him with irrefutable proof. So the employer fired him. The arbitrator noted that the 23-year employee had committed a serious safety infraction and then compounded his error by even more serious misconduct. And it couldn't conclude that the operator wouldn't commit another serious safety infraction in the future. His admission and apology came far too late. So his termination was justified [*Winners Merchants Intl LP v. Workers United Canada Council, Local 152*, [2013] CanLII 74235 (ON LA), Nov. 25, 2013].

Step #6: Train Workers on Safe Materials Storage

Be sure to train workers on your safe materials storage rules and procedures as well as the requirements in your jurisdiction.