

Working at height for agriculture workers

Infosheet for workers at height in agriculture

IOSH (adapting the Health and Safety Executive's definition) defines work at height as: "... working in any place where a person could fall a distance liable to cause personal injury. This can be above or below ground level. Work at height also covers places where objects could be dropped onto and injure a person (or persons) below. Working at height does not include a slip, trip or fall at the same level."

Falls in the agriculture sector

- Fragile roofs (e.g. glasshouse roofs or those made from corrugated metal or asbestos/fibre cement)
- lofts,
- ladders,
- farming vehicles (e.g. while dismounting the tractor)
- bale stacks, and
- unsuitable access equipment, such as buckets.

Hazards associated with working at height in agriculture

In agriculture, many serious falls happen during the construction, repair, or maintenance of buildings and structures - tasks that frequently require working at height (WAH). Several common items and conditions on farms can potentially create serious hazards when WAH precautions are not taken, such as:

• Fragile roofs

Alarming, in agriculture, roughly half the deaths and serious injuries caused by falls involve work on fragile roofs. Many farm buildings have roofing materials - such as fibre cement sheets, corroded metal, or fragile roof-lights - that cannot support a person's weight. These materials can give way without warning.

• Ladders

Ladders are widely used on farms, but they are often misused. Falls frequently occur because ladders can slip sideways, slide out at the base, or be set up on unstable ground. A common mistake is relying on a ladder "just for a quick job," with no thought given to proper positioning or securing.

• Improper or defective equipment

Temporary access equipment- including ladders, scaffolds, and platforms - can become hazardous if not maintained or used correctly. Defective equipment or using gear not suited to the task greatly increases the risk of falls.

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Other factors include:

- Unsecured access equipment, such as ladders and boards on roofs
- Weather conditions which make surfaces more slippery or reduce visibility
- Carrying or moving heavy loads, such as bales, logs, or feed bags, at height

Manage working at height for agriculture

- Avoid working at height whenever possible.
- Always assess risks
- Provide edge protection
- Glasshouse work should use automated systems or be performed from below. If access is essential, use nets, rails, or ride-on trolleys - never walk on glass.
- Avoid jumping from farm vehicles. Use steps and handholds, and wear non-slip footwear.
- Use scaffolds instead of ladders for longer or more complex jobs.
- Temporary, casual, and agency workers must receive proper safety training, equipment, and site information. Communicate hazards clearly, especially for those who have language barriers.
- For lone workers, assess whether the task can be safely done alone. Provide training, regular supervision, and ensure emergency arrangements are in place.

Fact box

Globally, at least 210,000 agricultural workers are killed by accidents each year, and fall from height is among the main causes of fatal accidents

In the UK, agriculture has the worst rate of fatal injuries across the main industrial sectors - some 21 times higher than the all-industries average

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Infosheet for workers and Occupational Safety and Health professionals (OSH)

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Advice for OSH professionals

All work at height should be risk assessed by an OSH professional. Professionals should develop:

- Their competency in assessing risks associated with work at height, including risks related to factors such as work pressure
- Relationships with operational stakeholders, to ensure they are able to provide ongoing support
- Their skills in influencing and negotiating with leaders, so that they are able to address risks related to excess pressure or unreasonable expectations

OSH professionals have a critical role to play in reducing the risk associated with working at height. Where their specific roles are those employed by local authorities, they can take steps to:

- Develop professional relationships with local farmers in order to understand their challenges and provide suitable advice
- Develop and offer training on the risks of work at height to farm workers
- Proactively complete informal site tours and walk-arounds to help workers identify hazards before incidents arise

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Advice for agriculture workers

Work at height is working in any place where you could fall far enough to cause personal injury, above or below ground level. It's important to remember that you don't need to be high up to be injured if you fall. If you need to work at any height, always use the proper equipment to reach it. Ladders should be a last resort, and you should never use makeshift alternatives like buckets, boxes, or pallets.

Becoming complacent about the risks involved in your work can happen over time, especially when people around you do not take risks seriously. It's also understandable to try and get jobs done quickly when the project is on a deadline.

But it's up to you to speak up when doing a job could put you at risk. Before starting a job, make sure:

- You've understood the training you've been given, and you feel confident doing the job
- You've done everything you can from the ground, before you go up
- The equipment looks and feels secure
- The surface you're due to work on is suitable, and if it may be fragile, you will be working from a platform
- The surface you'll be standing on is dry, well lit, and clear of obstacles
- The level you'll be working on has guard rails or other barriers installed, if this is reasonably practicable
- Your harness and any other protective equipment are secure and fit you well
- The weather isn't too severe to affect your safety

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Infosheet for organisations

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Call to action for organisations

- Plan ahead - Eliminate or reduce the need to work at height by using ground-based or automated solutions where possible.
- Provide and use the right equipment - MEWPs or scaffolds should be the first choice - avoid makeshift solutions or relying only on ladders.
- Assess the risks and protect the workers - Ensure working at height hazards, especially fragile surfaces, are identified, marked, and properly protected.
- Train everyone - Provide clear safety instructions and proper equipment for all workers - permanent, temporary, agency, or lone - regardless of language or experience.
- Supervise and communicate - Regularly check lone workers and maintain clear communication channels, ensure no one works at height unsafely or alone without enough safety precautions, as well as proper emergency arrangements.
- Commit to the reinforcement of safe working at height behaviour, lead by example, and keep safe work at height a shared responsibility

5 golden rules for safe work at height in agriculture

- Avoid working at height if you can - the ground is always safer.
- Assume all roofs are fragile - unless proven otherwise.
- Never step on glass or fragile roof lights - use proper access equipment.
- Don't take shortcuts - use scaffolds, platforms, or MEWPs instead of ladders for complex or prolonged work.
- Train and brief every worker - everyone must understand the risks and how to stay safe.

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