

Fall protection and working at heights in residential construction



Falls are a major cause of injury and death in Ontario workplaces. The vast majority of these incidents are falls from heights—even though the height may be no more than two or three metres.

There are often several contributing factors that can lead a worker to a fall from a height. Sadly, it is often young workers who are new to the job that are most vulnerable to a fall.

The Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development examined the root causes in 92 fall from heights fatalities from 2009 to 2016. They found that roofing contractors and residential building construction had the highest number of fatalities, and higher than average instances of “lack of worksite instruction and wearing PPE improperly.”¹

Common factors in fatalities

The common factors discovered in the Ministry’s root cause analysis of 92 fall from heights fatalities were workers that were new on the job, their age, and lack of training and protection.

New workers. Almost half of the fatalities occurred among workers who had been on the job for less than a year. Of these, 14 workers had been on the job for less than one month.

Age. Eight of the fatalities were young workers (under 25 years of age).

Lack of training and protection. Among the most common contributing factors were:

- Lack of worksite instruction (47.8%)
- Not wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) (42.4%)
- Lack of falls training (31.4%)
- Wearing PPE improperly (26.1%)
- Improper guarding (23.9%)

Employers play an important role

Brian Varrasso, IHSA’s Coordinator for Stakeholder and Public Relations, says it’s a clear message to employers. “Young workers who are new to the job are at risk. And employers need to do more to protect them.”

Working at heights (WAH) training is required by law for every worker on a construction project who may be exposed to a fall hazard. Employers are responsible for ensuring that their workers are provided with WAH training that has been approved by Ontario’s Prevention Office. A worker must also take a WAH refresher course every three years in order to maintain their training certification.

But even beyond the mandatory WAH training, there is more that employers can do to prevent falls and reduce the risks of working at heights.

One part of the solution is providing better site-specific training. Another is to change the workplace attitudes about talking about the risks, and to mentor and empower workers—especially young workers—to ask questions and become safer and better informed.

¹Ministry of Labour, *Fall from Heights Fatalities Analysis*, December 2018, p.34.



Ensure workers are trained in the proper use of PPE

This includes fall arrest systems, harnesses, lanyards, and anchor points. “The equipment works,” says Varrasso, “but you have to ensure people are wearing it and wearing it properly.”



Identify the fall hazards in your workplace

Are there open edges or unsafe scaffolds? Take steps to eliminate the hazards, such as installing guardrails.

Provide site-specific training

“This is critical given the findings,” says Varrasso. “Workers need to understand how to apply what they’ve learned in the classroom. For example, ‘Where are the fall hazards? Can the hazard be eliminated? Can I set up the fall protection equipment so that it stops me from reaching the edge?’ As a last resort, and if fall arrest is the only means of protection, make sure there is a rescue plan.”

Mentor and empower workers

Employers and supervisors need to observe their workers and coach them, especially in the first few months, to ensure they are using equipment properly. Make sure there is a comfortable, trusting relationship between supervisors and workers. And always encourage workers to ask for help, without fear of discipline.

How IHSA can help

IHSA offers the following fall prevention and working at heights training, as well as a wealth of other resources to help employers meet their site-specific training obligations. Visit our Falls Prevention and Working at Heights page to find training solutions and products. Some of these include:

Working at heights training

IHSA offers the following courses:

- Working at Heights—Fundamentals of Fall Prevention
- Working at Heights Refresher
- Working at Heights Instructor Workshop

Fall protection work plan template (BR005)

This is a step-by-step guide for controlling fall hazards on your jobsite. It’s easy to follow and will help supervisors choose the best available method of fall protection.

Fall prevention safety tool kit (W016)

This guide for employers includes safety talks on a range of topics including guardrails, three-point contact, extension ladders, scaffolds, and many more.

Sample fall rescue procedures (M029, Chapter 2)

Employers are legally required to develop written procedures for rescuing someone whose fall has been arrested. These rescue procedures should also be reviewed with the workers and must be posted in a conspicuous place at the project.

Go to [ihsa.ca](https://www.ihsa.ca), select Topics and Hazards, and click on the Fall Prevention and Working at Heights link.

Or visit [ihsa.ca/topics_hazards/fall_prevention_wah](https://www.ihsa.ca/topics_hazards/fall_prevention_wah)