Ladder Safety at Work: Using Ladders and Stepladders the Right Way

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First Things First: Ladders Are Not Banned

One of the most persistent health and safety myths is that ladders have been outlawed from workplaces. They have not. The Work at Height Regulations 2005 allow ladder use where a suitable risk assessment shows the task is low risk and short duration, typically a matter of minutes rather than hours, or where existing features of the site cannot be altered. What the regulations demand is that you select the right equipment for the job in hand. Falls from ladders remain a common cause of serious workplace injury, and poor equipment choice is a familiar factor.

The employer carries the legal duty under the Work at Height Regulations 2005 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to assess the task before work starts, not to leave the decision to whoever happens to be holding a ladder at the time. For many small and medium employers across Leicestershire and the wider East Midlands, this is exactly the kind of judgement call where an independent review from a health and safety consultancy can help.

Is a Ladder the Right Tool for This Job?

Before anyone climbs, the person planning the work should ask a short set of questions. Skipping this stage is a common reason ladder incidents happen, because the ladder itself is often perfectly sound; it is simply the wrong tool for what is being asked of it.

- Could the work be done from the ground, or avoided entirely by redesigning the task?
- Is it genuinely short duration and light work? Ladder tasks should not need heavy tools, bulky materials, or sustained two-handed effort.
- Can the user maintain three points of contact throughout and avoid overreaching to either side?
- Would a podium step, mobile tower or mobile elevating work platform be more sensible? For anything longer, heavier, or at significant height, it almost certainly would be.

Buy and issue ladders marked to EN 131 Professional for workplace use. Older domestic-class ladders bought from a general retailer are not rated for repeated trade use and should not appear on a commercial site, however convenient they seem.

Pre-Use Checks: One Minute That Prevents Falls

Every user should carry out a quick visual check immediately before use, every time, not just when the ladder looks obviously wrong. This takes under a minute and should cover:

- Stiles: not bent, split, cracked or showing signs of corrosion
- Rungs or treads: none missing, loose, bent or slippery with paint, mud or oil
- Feet: present, secure and not worn smooth, since the feet are what grip the ground
- Locking mechanisms on stepladders: engaging fully and not distorted or bent
- Stability devices, platforms and any fittings: secure, undamaged and correctly fitted

A damaged ladder comes out of service immediately and gets labelled or tagged so nobody helpfully puts it back into circulation. Alongside these user checks, ladders in use should also receive a more detailed inspection on a set schedule, with the interval decided by your risk assessment according to how heavily each ladder is used and the environment it works in. Someone named in your organisation, often a site supervisor or another responsible person, should own this schedule and keep a simple written log of dates, findings and any ladder withdrawn from service. That record helps demonstrate that you manage your equipment properly if anything is ever questioned after an incident.

Setting Up and Using a Leaning Ladder

Getting the setup right matters more than any other single factor in leaning ladder safety.

- **The 1 in 4 rule:** one unit out for every four up the ladder, which gives roughly a 75 degree angle. Too steep and it risks tipping backwards; too shallow and the base can slide out.
- **Firm, level ground.** Never stand a ladder on boxes, pallets, bricks or other items to gain extra height.
- **Secure it properly.** Tie the ladder to a suitable point where possible, or use an effective stability device if tying is not practical. Having a colleague foot the ladder is a last resort, not a first choice.

- **Extend the ladder above the landing point** by around a metre if stepping off at height, and never stand on the top three rungs of a leaning ladder.
- **Maintain three points of contact** while climbing, and keep a handhold while working wherever the task allows it.
- **Belt buckle inside the stiles.** If your navel passes the line of the stile, you are overreaching; climb down and move the ladder instead of stretching.
- Check for overhead cables, doors that could swing open into the ladder, and vehicle or pedestrian routes nearby. Cone off the area or lock doors as needed before work starts.

Run through this list every time a ladder is moved, not just when it is first put up. A ladder that was safe in one position can be unsafe a metre along.

Stepladders Deserve Just as Much Respect

Stepladders feel safe because they are stable and familiar, and that is exactly why they catch people out. Open the stepladder fully every time, with the locking bars engaged. Never work off the top steps unless the model is designed for it, with a proper platform and handhold at that height.

Avoid working side on, since that is how stepladders tip over sideways, and never straddle or stand astride a stepladder to reach further. These are simple rules, but they are the ones most often ignored under time pressure, particularly on sites where work at height is a daily occurrence rather than an occasional task, such as construction sites or warehousing and logistics operations.

Who Is Responsible, and What Should Training Cover

Responsibility for ladder safety sits with the employer, but it is shared in practice. The employer must assess the work, provide suitable equipment, and ensure staff know how to use it; supervisors must enforce the rules on site day to day; and individual workers must actually carry out pre-use checks and follow safe setup rather than cutting corners because a job looks quick.

None of that works without some basic instruction, and a short toolbox talk covering the points in this article, repeated periodically and whenever a new starter joins, can be a proportionate way to deliver it for low risk, infrequent ladder work, provided your risk assessment agrees. Where staff manage work at height more broadly, or where a supervisor needs a wider grounding in risk assessment and legal duties, our IOSH Managing Safely course, delivered by Integral Safety as an IOSH approved training provider, gives that structure.

Good Habits, Records and Avoiding Ladders Altogether

Ladder safety is mostly good habits done consistently: choosing the right tool, a genuine pre-use check, a sound setup, and no overreaching. Build those habits through regular toolbox talks and a recorded inspection schedule, and they will outlast any poster on a wall. It is also worth remembering that some work at height can be avoided altogether; roof, gutter and high-level inspections across housing association stock or commercial premises can often be carried out using our drone survey service instead of sending anyone up a ladder at all.

If work at height features regularly in your business, whether on a construction site or in a warehouse, Integral Safety can help with risk assessments and inspections. We also deliver practical working at height training, covering ladders and stepladders, at your own premises, so get in touch to arrange a session for your team. We work with employers across Leicestershire and the wider East Midlands; see our health and safety support across the East Midlands page for an overview.

Talk to Integral Safety Ltd

We are health and safety consultants based in Coalville, Leicestershire, working with businesses across the East Midlands. If anything in this guide applies to your workplace, we can help.

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This guide is general information about UK health and safety law and practice, correct as at 11 November 2026. It is not advice on your particular circumstances. The latest version is at https://integralsafetyltd.co.uk/blog/ladder-safety-at-work-using-ladders-and-stepladders-properly.