



SUBJECT: Preventing Falls from Vehicles

RECIPIENTS: All Council Services (including schools)

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In 2010/11, over a quarter of fatal injuries reported under RIDDOR involved workplace transport and around half of reported major injuries involved falls from vehicles. The Health & Safety Laboratory explains what steps employers can take to reduce the occurrence of these types of incidents.



According to the latest figures published by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), slips, trips, and falls (STFs) are responsible for more than half of all reported major injuries and nearly a third of over-seven day injuries to workers, with a combined estimated loss of two million working days annually. Add in injuries sustained from handling and that rises to around three million working days lost.

There are several factors that contribute to the high rate of STFs, some practical – such as safe access to vehicles or footwear – and some a result of working practices. For any employer seeking to reduce the risk of injury and minimise lost time, it is important to be aware of the potential hazards and how best to manage the risks.

The ideal method of preventing a fall from height is to remove the need to work at height at all, but this is often easier said than done – and, of course, the driver of an HGV still has to access his or her cab. However, it is worth considering whether loading and securing of the load can be carried out from the ground or, if this is impractical, how the driver and/or loaders can be protected.

Ensuring safe access

Access to vehicles is a significant contributory cause of STFs, whether accessing the cab, the fifth wheel area, or the load bed itself. HSL's research indicates that the design of the cab steps and provision of access to the fifth wheel area can be problematic, with awkward changes in step height and limited space to work putting the driver at risk of slipping and falling. Slip prevention depends on physical contact between the individual's shoes and the floor surface, and loading and unloading of vehicles is often carried out in wet, muddy, or icy conditions that can significantly reduce the grip available. The fifth wheel area is also often contaminated with oil and grease, making it even more treacherous. Access to the load bed can be poor; fold-out ladders often have a high first step with no handholds, and can be difficult to see from above, particularly in low light conditions. While the load bed of a vehicle usually provides good resistance to slipping, problems can occur when moving from a relatively high-friction area to an area of much lower friction, such as stepping onto a tail lift or a painted or exposed metal section of the load bed.

Specifying appropriate footwear

Safety footwear tends to be purchased to protect the wearer's feet from impact, and slip resistance can vary considerably between manufacturers and types of shoe. The situation is further complicated by the need to work on different floor surfaces: shoes with anti-slip soles that work well on an aluminium-floored tail lift, for example, may not work well on metal profiled cab steps, which require a good interlock with shoe cleats. Contaminants such as diesel or mud can also significantly reduce the effectiveness of the footwear.

Environmental considerations

Adverse environmental conditions can make loading or unloading more hazardous, and not only because surfaces become more slippery in wet or icy conditions. Sheeting, or opening and closing the curtains of a curtain-sider, can lead to falls in high winds, as the material acts as a sail and pulls the driver/loader over.

Night working, particularly in the winter months when mornings are dark, increases the risk that drivers and loaders will not see the edges of the load bed or tail lift while working on the vehicle, or tripping hazards on or around the vehicle. Hot weather can lead to heat stress, with a resultant risk of fainting or dizziness that can result in the driver/loader falling from the vehicle.

Where loads have not been secured properly for transport, there is a risk that they may become unstable or move during the journey, so that – for example – they may rest on the curtain of a curtain-sider and then topple from the vehicle as the driver pulls back the curtain. The first instinct is generally to jump back, and this can result in slip or trip injuries. If a load has shifted so much that it cannot be unloaded by fork lift truck, then often the only solution is to manually unload, and this immediately puts unloading personnel at risk in a situation they may not be prepared for and where they may not have suitable footwear and/or means of access to the load bed.

The good news is that despite these pitfalls, there are some straightforward ways to reduce the risk of injury. At the purchase stage, consider specifying anti-slip surfaces, particularly in the fifth wheel area, and steps with even step heights and depths. Handrails, handholds and colour contrast markings on edges can also help to prevent falls. Provide a safe means of access, such as steps, gantries, or platforms to vehicles and make sure the loading area is well lit and there are no obstructions that drivers and loaders could trip over when walking around the vehicle.

The right footwear is key in reducing the risk of slips, trips, and falls. This summer HSL will be launching a new Footwear Rating Scheme to help companies choose the best footwear for their needs. The use of slip-resistant footwear has been shown to be effective in reducing accidents across a wide range of businesses, from vehicle distribution to catering and even door-to-door sales. Selecting the right footwear to use can be problematic, as the slip test used for CE marking of safety shoes only provides basic quality assurance, and is not useful to identify specialist footwear that can be used to control slip risk. The new Footwear Rating Scheme will simplify the selection process, allowing buyers to select a level of slip resistance to suit their situation. Footwear will have a simple star rating provided by HSL, with more stars indicating greater slip resistance.

HSL's Falls Prevention Team also provides training and bespoke advice to companies looking to manage the risks of slips, trips, and falls. Find out more at www.hsl.gov.uk/

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If you require further assistance or clarification on the subject please contact:

Your Mouchel Health & Safety Adviser (see George section: Corporate > Information for Working > Risk Management > H&S Advisers)