Protect Yourself from the Dangers of Drywall

Safety Talk

Drywall sheets are made from a variety of materials and can easily weigh between 50 to 120 pounds (23 to 54 kilograms). Workers who install drywall are at risk for falls, back injuries, muscle strains and respiratory exposure to dust.

What's at Stake?

Drywall installers face the following hazards:

Exposure to dust

Drywall joint compound commonly contains silica, talc, mica, and gypsum. These substances have been attributed to varying degrees of respiratory tract irritation. Breathing the dust from drywall joint compounds can cause breathing difficulties similar to asthma, as well as persistent throat irritation, coughing, and phlegm production. When silica is present in a drywall compound, workers also face increased risk of silicosis and lung cancer. These symptoms may be even more exaggerated in workers who smoke or who have existing respiratory illness. Exposure to dust can also irritate the mucus membranes of the nose and eyes.

Fall Hazards

Drywall installation often requires the use of scaffolding. Many fatal injuries have resulted from falls of less than 15 feet (4.5 meters). Sheetrock is very heavy and can easily cause a worker to lose his or her balance, especially when working from a height.

Overexertion and muscle strain

Lifting, holding, and carrying heavy sheetrock requires constant exertion of muscles in the back and arms. Back injuries are especially common among drywall installers. Repetitive motions when cutting, sanding, and lifting can damage spinal discs and nerves in the back.

What Can Go Wrong?

A young drywall installer was working on a mobile scaffold from a height of about seven feet (two meters). He climbed onto the scaffold to hang large pieces of sheetrock on the wall. The worker was holding the sheetrock against the wall when

the scaffold suddenly moved backwards. The worker lost his balance and fell to the ground, striking his head against the concrete floor. He was later transported to a hospital where he died from a blunt force head injury.

How to Protect Yourself:

- Always clear your pathway by removing potential obstacles before you lift anything.
- Minimize the need for heavy lifting by having materials delivered close to where they will be used.
- Use a buddy – always make lifting a two-person procedure.
- Take short rest breaks throughout the day to minimize muscle fatigue.
- Use T-jacks and board hanger clamps to hold drywall in place while you are attaching it to the wall with screws or nails.
- Use personal protective equipment including, but not limited to, eye goggles, steel-toed boots, a dust mask or respirator, long-sleeved clothing, and rubberized gloves.
- Always review Safety Data Sheets to make sure you’re familiar with and protected against all substances on your jobsite.
- Familiarize yourself with scaffolding safety – always assemble scaffolding according to the manufacturer’s instructions and check to make sure the wheels on mobile units are locked before using them.

Final Word

There are many different ways to suffer injuries or illness as a result of installing drywall. Make sure you stay safe by wearing PPE, resting when your muscles require it, and proceeding with caution when performing heavy lifts.