Rooftop Snow and Ice Removal: Sled On A Hill, Not Off A Roof



Safety Talk

A worker with 35 years of experience was clearing snow and ice off a roof when he slipped and fell. The fall sent him plummeting through a plexi-glass panel to his death four stories below, inside an atrium crowded with shoppers and lunchtime visitors. Investigators found the worker's safety harness had not been attached to an anchor point on the roof. OSHA fine the company $40,750, but more importantly, a spouse lost her husband and his family lost a kind, caring person.

"He didn't come back home, and he never will come back home."

WHAT'S AT STAKE
Snow and ice removal is a part of life for many facilities affected by winter weather. In particular, clearing snow and ice from a roof can prevent injuries and property loss that occur when a roof collapses – but this activity also introduces hazards we need to understand and prepare for before any of us step on a roof.

Today we'll review what hazards exist when clearing snow from a roof along with tips to clear snow and ice safely from a roof.

WHAT'S THE DANGER
Some of the most common rooftop snow removal hazards include:

- Falls – such as slipping off a roof, or falling through under-supported roof sections or structures like skylights. Falls are the most common cause of injuries and deaths from rooftop snow removal.
- Overexertion – like suffering a back injury or experiencing a heart attack from removing too much snow too quickly or using the wrong snow removal techniques
- Cold stress – like frostbite or hypothermia, which can occur if you aren't protected from cold temperatures
- Electrical shock – from unintended contact with exposed power lines while removing snow

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF
Ask yourself one question before stepping on a roof: Can the snow or ice be removed without going on the roof? If you're unsure or think the answer is "no", double-check with your supervisor before doing anything. There may be removal processes or techniques you're not aware of, like using drag lines or snow rakes from the ground.

If your facility or building design requires being on the roof to clear snow, be sure you understand key steps you can take to protect yourself:

- Understand where hidden hazards exist – under-supported roof sections, skylights, vents, trip hazards like covers or equipment, etc.
- Determine how you'll remove snow without creating piles or imbalances that can overload or collapse a section of the roof where you or others are working
- If you're working at a height of 4 or more feet, use fall protection equipment and practice how to rescue any co-workers that end up relying on their fall protection equipment
- If you're using a ladder, don't use a snow rake or shovel while on the ladder, and remove snow from your footwear before using the ladder – you're otherwise far more likely to lose your balance
- Understand the correct pathways on and off the roof
- Wear multiple layers of warm clothing to prevent frostbite and hypothermia
- If you're on the ground during snow removal, do not stand in an area where snow will fall when removed from the roof – and do not let others stand within 10 feet of this area

If you're unclear about any of these steps to protect yourself, ask your supervisor before removing snow or ice from the roof of any building or facility.

FINAL WORD

Snow may soften the blow when you fall off a sled, but it won't make falling off a roof feel any better. Stepping on a roof any time of the year requires an understanding of the safety hazards you'll face – and adding a layer of snow or ice to the job only increases the need to prepare in advance.