

Walking, Working Surfaces Stats & Facts



DID YOU KNOW?

The U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration today issued a final rule updating its general industry Walking-Working Surfaces standards specific to slip, trip, and fall hazards. The rule also includes a new section under the general industry Personal Protective Equipment standards that establishes employer requirements for using personal fall protection systems.

"The final rule will increase workplace protection from those hazards, especially fall hazards, which are a leading cause of worker deaths and injuries," said Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health Dr. David Michaels. "OSHA believes advances in technology and greater flexibility will reduce worker deaths and injuries from falls." The final rule also increases consistency between general and construction industries, which will help employers and workers that work in both industries.

OSHA estimates the final standard will prevent 29 fatalities and more than 5,842 injuries annually. The rule becomes effective on Jan. 17, 2017, and will affect approximately 112 million workers at seven million worksites.

The final rule's most significant update is allowing employers to select the fall protection system that works best for them, choosing from a range of accepted options including personal fall protection systems. OSHA has permitted the use of personal fall protection systems in construction since 1994 and the final rule adopts similar requirements for general industry. Other changes include allowing employers to use rope descent systems up to 300 feet above a lower level; prohibiting the use of body belts as part of a personal fall arrest system; and requiring worker training on personal fall protection systems and fall equipment.

Each year over 200,000 employees are injured and hundreds die from falls from heights and falls to the same level. OSHA's final rule on Walking Working Surfaces and Personal Fall Protection focuses on better protecting employees from these hazards.

The final rule became effective on January 17, 2017, updating the general industry standards addressing slip, trip and fall hazards (§1910 Subpart D) and adding requirements for personal fall protection systems (§1910 Subpart I). Many of these updates better align general industry with construction standards. Even though the updated standard has been in place for more than two years, many employers have questions or even remain unaware of the changes.

An important change that may affect your workplace pertains to guardrails. Previously, guardrails had been required as the primary fall protection method for open sides or edges 4' or higher. With the new performance-based rule, employers may decide which acceptable fall protection system best fits an individual situation; providing the employer with greater compliance flexibility. For example, edge proximity restrictions may be used on low-slope roofs that are temporarily and infrequently accessed.

For window washers and other exterior building maintenance personnel, the final rule prohibits employers from using rope descent systems (RDS) at heights greater than 300 feet (certain exceptions apply). In addition, building owners must provide, and employers must obtain, proof that permanent anchorages used with RDS have been inspected, tested, certified, and maintained as capable of supporting at least 5,000 pounds per employee attached.

Specific employer requirements include:

- Train workers on how to use fall protection systems, including performance, use and maintenance.
- Train exposed workers on fall hazards.
- Inspect walking-working surfaces regularly and as needed. Correct, repair, or guard against hazardous conditions.
- Install fall protection (personal fall arrest systems, ladder safety systems, cages, wells) on existing fixed ladders (over 24 feet) that do not have any fall protection.
- Install ladder safety or personal fall arrest systems on new fixed ladders (over 24 feet) and replacement ladders.

The training requirements of the rule are performance-based, which allows employers to choose the methods of training. Employers may use classroom, audio-visual, demonstrations, field training, web-based, computer-based or other forms of training to meet the requirements of the standard. Regardless of the method, training must be performed by a qualified person.

Retraining is also performance-based and required as needed. "As needed" can be interpreted as following an incident, near miss, process change, or equipment change. There is no annual training requirement.

With the implementation of the final standard, OSHA estimates that 29 fatalities and more than 5,842 lost-workday injuries will be avoided annually. With that impact it may well be worth the 25 years of work that went into the development and implementation of this standard.

OSHA is revising and updating its general industry standards on walking-working surfaces to prevent and reduce workplace slips, trips, and falls, as well as other injuries and fatalities associated with walking-working surface hazards. The final rule includes revised and new provisions addressing, for example, fixed ladders; rope descent systems; fall protection systems and criteria, including personal fall protection systems; and training on fall hazards and fall protection systems. In addition, the final rule adds requirements on the design, performance, and use of personal fall protection systems.

The final rule increases consistency between the general industry and construction standards, which will make compliance easier for employers who conduct operations in both industry sectors. Similarly, the final rule updates requirements to reflect advances in technology and to make them consistent with more recent OSHA standards and national consensus standards. OSHA has also reorganized the requirements and

incorporated plain language in order to make the final rule easier to understand and follow. The final rule also uses performance-based language whenever possible to give employers greater compliance flexibility.