

Low heights have their own dangers

More people take chances at lower heights because they seem less of a risk, but these kinds of falls come with their own dangers.

It doesn't take much height to lead to a fatal fall.

In fact, many falls from roofs and ladders that cause death or serious injury are from less than three metres.

One of the more recent deaths was a 45-year-old construction worker who fell from the first floor of a building onto concrete in Hobsonville in May.

Ryan Groves, a safety advisor at construction safety organisation Site Safe, says low level heights have their own dangers.

One is just that people are more complacent, or maybe optimistic, about safety at lower levels.

PUT SOMEBODY 20M ABOVE GROUND ON SCAFFOLDING AND THEY'LL USUALLY TAKE ALL THE PRECAUTIONS REQUIRED. PUT SOMEBODY TWO OR THREE METRES UP A LADDER AND THEY'RE MORE LIKELY TO TAKE RISKS. BUT THE CONCRETE DOESN'T GET ANY SOFTER.

"It's the same with people working on a truck deck or a ute deck or on the single storey of a residential dwelling," Ryan says.

"And this applies on the weekends to people standing on roofs cleaning their guttering and climbing a ladder to do some maintenance. We naturally have an instinct that low level falls aren't going to hurt."

Another, less obvious reason low level falls can be so devastating is that most people don't have the reflexes to allow them to protect themselves.

"When you fall from a low level you just don't have enough time to put your hands out and do anything to fix it.

"At six metres you can do a full revolution. So, you might fall backwards and be able to land back on your feet so you just break an ankle or a leg. But if you fall at three metres or less, most people don't have enough time to correct their stance and can fall onto their spine or their neck."

He says there was a case of a tradesman who fell 2.2



SITE SAFE SAFETY ADVISOR RYAN GROVES SAYS LOW-LEVEL FALLS COME WITH THEIR OWN BUILT-IN DANGERS. PEOPLE TAKE MORE CARE WHEN WORKING AT HEIGHT, BUT ARE OFTEN LIKELY TO CUT CORNERS AT LOWER LEVELS.

metres when his feet slipped out from under him. He ended up landing on his head and breaking his neck.

"He would have recognised he was falling but your brain takes longer to respond and react."

Injury falls from trucks and the backs of utes are also common, Ryan says.

In fact, WorkSafe figures for 2019 show there have already been two deaths from vehicle falls. One was a 71-year-old who fell from a truck trailer in Wellington, the other was a 65-year-old in Auckland who fell from a truck.

"A delivery truck can turn up to a residential building site with pre-nailed framing and people climb up to three metres to get to them.

"I mean, you put a guard rail around people working at two metres on a house but a truck driver can be working at three metres with nothing."

The Site Safe safety specialist says planning a job is a huge part of dealing with any risks to workers.

"The Health and Safety at Work Act talks about having a work method statement. Something that's not specifically a task analysis or a job safety analysis (JSA) but at least a written system that says "'this is how we're going to do a job.'

"So, before we start a job, we assess it, we identify any risks and control them. So, we do a 5 by 5 [see left] or a simple pre-start check. These can pick up on those risks quite easily and alert people to anything that could catch them out."

Then there are common building practices that can lead to a major hazard on a site.

"When it comes to putting in stairs in a two-storey house, these are usually put in late in the build because the builder doesn't want them to get damaged, but that leaves a gaping hole in the middle of a floor where the stairs are going to go.

"They assume because everybody knows it's there nobody will fall down, but it leaves a void there."

WorkSafe prosecuted an Auckland construction company this year after a worker fell through such a void. He received traumatic brain injury and fractures to his skull and right arm when he fell 3.4 metres on a residential building site. The company was found guilty and fined $100,000.

"The answer is to put the stairs in early but cover them in plywood so they're actually usable."

Ryan says it is always key to think about planning a job to remove any risk of falls.

In fact, the best controls are ones that don't require a worker to make any big decisions, such as putting up protective barriers and edge protection, or using properly erected scaffolding.

Five by five

The 5 by 5 system for reducing risks of all kinds is to:

1. Identify hazards;
2. Assess the level of risk each hazard identified;
3. Control the risk to reduce the harm and its severity;
4. Reassess the level of risk for each hazard;
5. Review and monitor that controls are working and risk levels are acceptable.

SITESAFE

For more information on reducing risks, go to: https://www.sitesafe.org.nz/guides--resources/practical-safety-advice/risk-control/