

A step too far?

Preventing falls from height in offices and similar environments



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This leaflet is for staff who may occasionally need to use access equipment to reach high levels. It gives advice on minimising the need to work at height and how to use access equipment safely.

Many major injuries in education are caused by 'low' falls (below two metres). Most involve stairs, but other activities are also involved, such as falls from desks, chairs or stepladders. Even a low fall can cause serious injury. In a six year period there were five deaths and over three thousand injuries in the Education Sector due to falling from height (HSE statistics).

Can you avoid working at height?

The best way to reduce the risk of a fall from height is to avoid the need to access high levels:

- Try to avoid the need to store equipment at height.
- If you do need to store items at height, only store lightweight, infrequently used items on the higher shelves and make sure you stack them securely.
- Keep clear access to windows if you need to open them, or use poles for high windows. If you can't reach your windows safely - report it.
- If you need to access high levels, use "kickstools" or stepladders. (Follow our guidance below on the safe use of stepladders).
- Never use chairs, desks or other furniture; they are not designed to be stood upon. You could slip, or they could collapse or throw you off balance.
- If you don't have suitable access equipment or are worried about its condition, speak to your manager.



If you use stepladders:

- Do not position it in an area where it could get knocked over.
- Check it for obvious signs of damage before use (see Is it safe?). If it is damaged - do not use it and immediately report it.
- Make sure there is nothing on the floor, or steps (or feet) of the stepladder which could cause you to slip, such as water, oil or grease.
- Make sure the stepladder rests firmly on the floor without wobbling or slipping.
- Do not twist your body to one side or stretch away from the ladder.
- Do not over-reach. Make sure your waist and hips stay within the vertical uprights and keep both feet on the steps.
- Face forwards, with the ladder between you and area you want to access. Move the ladder if necessary.

- Always maintain at least 3 points of contact with the ladder (2 feet and a hand or 2 feet and your body). Do not stand on the top 2 steps unless there is a safe handhold on the steps.
- All stepladders and ladders should have instructions on their safe use displayed on them. They should also be inspected at least annually and be marked with their last inspection date and a clear indication of whether they are safe to use.
- Do not use a stepladder if you suffer from a medical condition or are taking any medication which may affect your balance on the stepladder. Ask someone else to use the stepladder for you or inform your manager.

Is it safe?

Carry out these simple checks before you use a stepladder, starting from the bottom up:

- ✓ Feet – make sure the rubber feet are in place, clean and undamaged and that any wheels are uncontaminated and run freely when transporting the ladder, but lock into position before use;
- ✓ Uprights – check the uprights are in good condition, no dents or damage;
- ✓ Rungs (steps) – look to make sure that any rubber covering is securely stuck down, in good condition and free from dirt/grease/oil contamination;
- ✓ Step lock – must lock securely into position;
- ✓ Hinge – all bolts/screws must be secure and tight;
- ✓ Is it suitable for the job, high enough, sturdy enough?

Using a kickstool?

A kickstool does not have stability issues like a stepladder and is designed not to move when you apply weight to it. You should carry out pre-use checks to ensure the wheels are running freely, there is no contamination on the wheels or steps, and rubber surfaces are stuck down securely. Also check that it locks into position when you put weight onto the kickstool. A kickstool normally has rubber on the bottom to reduce the likelihood of it slipping on the flooring. Check that the rubber isn't damaged.

You should wear shoes that will not slip on the stool's surfaces and avoid clothes that you could catch your heel on when mounting or dismounting the kickstool.

Be prepared to move the stool into a new position rather than risk overreaching for access to an item, and subsequently losing your balance. Don't carry items in both hands when standing on the kickstool.



If you regularly use ladders and stepladders for work, you should attend one of the University's ladder safety courses.

Stepladder inspection

1. Safety handrail

All stepladders should have one!

2. Hinge

Fully engages, no dents, bends, nicks or splits. Rivets and bolts in place and tight.

3. Step lock

No contamination, fully engages and locks into place, no nicks, dents or splits.

4. Feet

Rubber caps present, no damage or contamination which could cause feet to slip.

5. Uprights

No dents, nicks or splits.

6. Rungs (steps)

No contamination, rivets in place and tight, no dents, nicks or splits. Rubber mats firmly in place and complete.

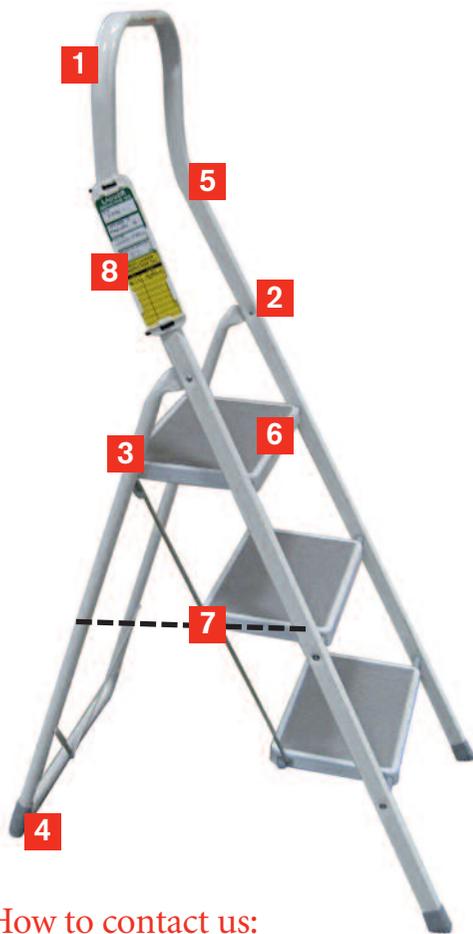
7. Stays

Some stepladders have stays that are attached to the front and back uprights. These may be rigid or a strap. If fitted they should be taut or locked fully into position. The hinge must be in good condition, rivets and bolts in place and tight.

8. Ladder Tag/Label

Formal inspections should be carried out at least annually and date of last inspection recorded on tag/label attached to the ladder.

You can find more information on stepladder safety, register and inspection forms on the University Health and Safety website.



How to contact us:

Health and Safety Advisory Service (HSAS)
T (01206 87) 2944
E safety@essex.ac.uk

For more detailed information on a wide range of health and safety topics, visit the University's Health and Safety web pages at www.essex.ac.uk/health-safety

