

WORKING AT HEIGHTS

A Supervisor's Safety Guide | RK SAFETY Workplace Safety Series

This is Guide 1 of 5 in the RK SAFETY Workplace Safety Series — download the full series at <https://rksafety.co.za/safety-resources/>

Why This Risk Matters

A fall from height takes seconds. The consequences last a lifetime — or end one. Behind every fatality statistic is a father who left home that morning with a packed lunch and a to-do list. A mother. A breadwinner. Working at heights remains one of the leading causes of fatal and serious injuries across South African construction sites, yet the majority of these incidents are entirely preventable.

The physical toll — spinal injuries, traumatic brain injuries, amputations — is matched only by the emotional devastation on families and the financial impact on businesses. Legal liability, downtime, investigation costs, and reputational damage can cripple a contractor. No project deadline is worth a life.

The numbers confirm what experienced supervisors already know: according to data from Federated Employers Mutual (FEM), falls from height accounted for 14% of all construction industry fatalities recorded over the decade to 2024 — making it consistently one of the top three causes of construction deaths in South Africa. (Source: FEM Annual Review, cited in Mining Weekly, 2025.) Behind that percentage are real people and real families. The fact that this number has remained stubbornly high for years is not a reflection of an unavoidable hazard — it is a reflection of preventable failures in planning, training, and supervision.

Most Common Causes of Incidents

- Failure to use or incorrectly fitted fall arrest equipment
- Use of makeshift or damaged scaffolding
- Working at height without a valid fall protection plan
- Inadequate edge protection, guardrails or barriers
- Supervisor sign-off without physical inspection of the work area
- Workers not trained or refreshed on working at heights procedures
- **Poor weather conditions ignored** — wind, rain, wet surfaces
- Ladders used incorrectly or in poor condition

What South African Law Requires

The Construction Regulations (2014), promulgated under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993 (OHS Act), impose specific duties on employers and contractors:

- Section 10 of the Construction Regulations requires that a Fall Protection Plan (FPP) be developed by a competent person before any work at height commences.
- The FPP must identify all fall hazards, specify control measures, and include rescue procedures.
- All workers performing tasks at height must be trained and medically certified as fit for working at height.
- Fall arrest equipment must be inspected before each use and formally inspected at intervals specified by the manufacturer.
- The Construction Regulations also require that scaffolding be erected, altered, and dismantled under the supervision of a competent scaffolding supervisor.

Step-by-Step Prevention Checklist

- 1. Develop and maintain a Fall Protection Plan** — Ensure it is site-specific, signed off by a competent person, and reviewed after any incident or major change in scope.

2. **Conduct pre-task briefings** — Brief every worker on fall hazards and controls before the shift begins. Never assume they remember yesterday's briefing.
3. **Inspect all fall arrest equipment daily** — Full body harnesses, lanyards, anchor points, and lifelines must be checked before use. Damaged equipment must be tagged and removed from service immediately.
4. **Verify anchor point integrity** — Anchors must be capable of supporting a minimum of 10 kN per attached worker. Do not improvise anchor points.
5. **Install and maintain edge protection** — Guardrails, toe boards, and safety nets must be in place wherever edge exposure exists. Inspect these at the start of each shift.
6. **Restrict access to uncontrolled height zones** — Use barricading and signage to prevent unauthorised access to elevated areas.
7. **Check weather conditions** — Halt all work at height during high winds, lightning, or heavy rain. Assign a responsible person to monitor conditions throughout the day.
8. **Ensure ladders are used safely** — Ladders must extend 1 metre above the landing point, be secured at the top and bottom, and be used at the correct angle (1:4 ratio). Never carry tools or materials up a ladder.
9. **Certify and refresh worker training** — All workers must hold a current working at heights certificate. Refresher training is required at regular intervals or following an incident.
10. **Have an emergency rescue plan** — A documented, practised rescue procedure must exist. Do not wait for an incident to figure out how you will retrieve an arrested worker.

KEY TAKEAWAY: *Every South African worker deserves to go home safely. A robust fall protection programme is not just a legal requirement — it is a moral obligation. At RK SAFETY, we help your team build the knowledge, systems, and culture to ensure the safe way forward is always taken, on every elevated surface, every single day.*

Book your Working at Heights or Fall Protection Plan training with RK SAFETY — visit rksafety.co.za/training or contact us today on 031 837 3461.



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