

FORKLIFT & MATERIAL HANDLING SAFETY

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

This is Guide 3 of 5 in the RK SAFETY Workplace Safety Series — download the full series at <https://rksafety.co.za/safety-resources/>

Why This Risk Matters

Forklifts are the workhorses of South African warehousing and logistics operations — and one of the most dangerous pieces of equipment on any floor. A fully loaded forklift travelling at operating speed carries enough force to kill instantly. Pedestrian-forklift collisions, tip-overs, and falling loads account for a disproportionate share of serious injuries and fatalities in warehousing environments.

The tragedy is compounded by predictability. Most forklift-related incidents happen not through equipment failure but through human error — an operator cutting a corner, a pedestrian stepping out from behind racking, a supervisor overlooking a known hazard because production pressure is high. Every fatality in this category represents a failure of systems that could have been in place.

Consolidated national statistics on forklift incidents in South Africa are not publicly available — a data gap that itself reflects how under-measured this risk remains in our warehousing and logistics sector. For context, the United States Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) estimates that powered industrial trucks cause approximately 85 workplace fatalities and 34,900 serious injuries annually in the US alone. (Source: US OSHA — international data used for illustrative purposes; South Africa-specific figures are not centrally reported.) Given the scale of South Africa's warehousing and logistics sector, and the known prevalence of unlicensed operators and inadequate pedestrian segregation on local warehouse floors, there is no responsible basis for assuming our risk profile is lower.

Most Common Causes of Incidents

- Unlicensed or inadequately trained forklift operators
- **Absence of pedestrian segregation** — shared walkways with forklift traffic
- Speeding or reckless operation on warehouse floors
- Overloading forklifts beyond rated capacity
- **Poor housekeeping** — cluttered aisles, unmarked hazards
- Forklift pre-use inspections not conducted or poorly documented
- Reversing into blind spots without a spotter
- Operators distracted by mobile phones or earphones

What South African Law Requires

Forklift and material handling operations are regulated primarily under the OHS Act and the General Safety Regulations (1985), as well as the Driven Machinery Regulations (1988):

- The Driven Machinery Regulations (Regulation 18) require that no person may operate a forklift unless they hold a valid operator's certificate of competency.
- **Employers must ensure pre-shift inspections are conducted and documented** — defective equipment must be taken out of service immediately.
- The General Safety Regulations require employers to identify and control hazards associated with moving machinery and pedestrian interfaces.
- **SANS 10396 provides the South African national standard for the safe use of powered industrial trucks** — compliance with this standard is strongly recommended and referenced in industry best practice.
- The Facilities Regulations (where applicable) require adequate aisle widths, traffic management, and demarcation of pedestrian walkways.

Step-by-Step Prevention Checklist

- 1. Implement strict pedestrian-forklift segregation** — Demarcate all pedestrian walkways with yellow lines and physical barriers. No shared pathways. Pedestrians must use designated routes at all times.
- 2. Verify operator certification before every assignment** — Only operators holding a valid, current certificate may operate a forklift. Check the certificate date. Assign operators to equipment types they are certified for.
- 3. Conduct documented pre-use inspections** — Use a standardised checklist covering brakes, tyres, lights, horn, forks, mast, and fluid levels. Any defect must be reported and the machine grounded until repaired.
- 4. Enforce speed limits on the warehouse floor** — Post and enforce speed limit signage. A maximum of 8 km/h in operating areas is a common benchmark. Speeding must be treated as a serious disciplinary matter.
- 5. Never exceed rated load capacity** — Load capacities must be displayed on every forklift. Overloading destabilises the machine and dramatically increases tip-over risk. Operators must refuse instructions to exceed capacity.
- 6. Mandate spotters for high-risk reversing** — Any reversing movement in a congested area, near a loading bay door, or in reduced visibility must be accompanied by a designated spotter using standardised hand signals.
- 7. Implement a zero-tolerance policy on mobile device use** — Operators must not use mobile phones, earphones, or any handheld devices while operating equipment. This is a dismissible offence in most well-run warehouses.
- 8. Maintain housekeeping standards** — Aisles must be kept clear of pallets, packaging, and debris at all times. Assign housekeeping responsibilities to specific individuals with daily sign-off.
- 9. Conduct regular refresher training and competency assessments** — Operator training is not once-off. Refresher assessments, particularly after incidents or near-misses, reinforce standards and correct complacency.
- 10. Install physical engineering controls** — Convex mirrors at blind intersections, proximity warning systems, and speed-limiting devices on high-risk equipment are cost-effective investments that save lives.

KEY TAKEAWAY: *A well-run warehouse floor feels effortless — pedestrians and equipment moving in predictable, controlled patterns. That order does not happen by accident. It requires deliberate design, consistent enforcement, and workers who are trained to know exactly what the risks are and how to manage them. RK SAFETY's forklift and material handling training helps your team build that culture of disciplined, safe operations — the safe way forward in every aisle.*

Book your Forklift Operator or Material Handling Safety training with RK SAFETY — visit rksafety.co.za/training or contact us today on 031 837 3461.



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