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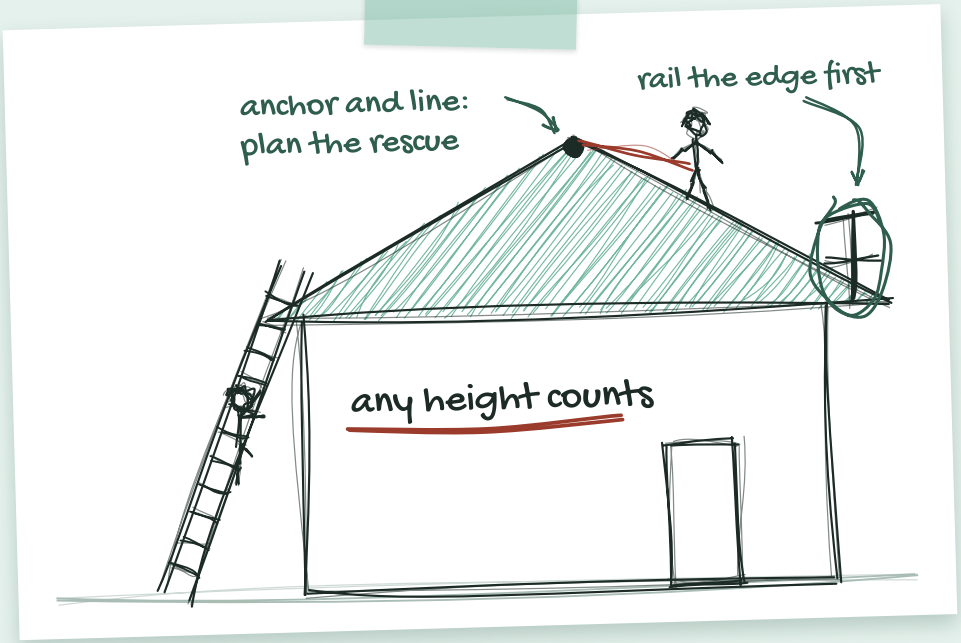
Field guide 8



Working at height

Preventing falls from roofs, ladders, scaffolds and edges, whatever the height and however short the job.

For middle managers and senior leaders in Aotearoa New Zealand

Health and safety field guide 8
Edition 2.3
Published 27 October 2026

A wet roof in Wellington

The worker was 38, a father of five, and two months into a new job. In April 2023 he was working on a commercial roof in central Wellington.

It was raining. The roof was new iron, with cleaning product on it. He had no training in working at height. There was only limited edge protection, and no harness was in use.

He fell about 6 metres. He spent six months in hospital with a brain injury and many broken bones. When the case ended two years later, he had not worked since the fall.

What the story shows

Nothing about that day was unusual. Rain, a slippery roof and a new worker are ordinary. What was missing was protection that did not depend on him being careful.

Why this guide starts here

WorkSafe says "working at height is a leading cause of serious injury and death in New Zealand". Falls happen on ordinary days, on ordinary jobs, and often from lower than people expect (page 4).

This guide is about the decisions made before anyone climbs. Page 13 tells what the court decided.

> **Good edge protection works on the worst day, for the newest worker.**

Sources WorkSafe media release, Worker's six metre fall prompts industry call out (17 April 2025); WorkSafe, Working at height in New Zealand (August 2026).

About this guide

Who it is for

Senior leaders who set budgets, prices and programmes that decide whether crews get scaffolding and edge protection.

Middle managers who plan the work, choose the equipment and decide whether to stop when the weather turns.

How to use it

Read pages 2 to 7 at your own pace. Take the spotting pages (8 and 9) and the pocket card (page 20) onto site. Write what you find on page 19. Key words are explained on page 21.

Field guide 1 explains the ideas behind the series. Field guide 6 covers critical risks in full.

Finding your way

Before you start	2
The duty	5
Spotting fall risks	8
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Reading these pages

A taped card with footprints: something to try at work



A small compass: the sentence or point after it is this guide's view



A pink box with a red edge: what changes from 1 April 2027



The foot strip: sources. Untinted tables, sketches and checklists are this guide's own



A hatched edge with a compass: this guide's own view

A tinted box: the law, WorkSafe guidance or court facts



A dark box: this guide's lessons from a court case

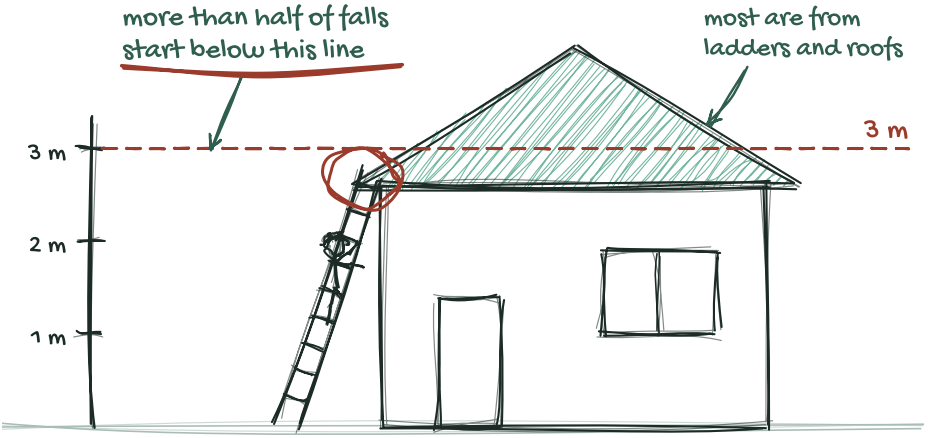


Priority dots (this guide's rating): one means watch, three means act today

In this guide, "the Act" means the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, "s" means section and "ss" means sections. A PCBU is a "person conducting a business or undertaking", usually an organisation. "The 1995 Regulations" means the Health and Safety in Employment Regulations 1995, parts of which are still in force. "The Amendment Act" means the Health and Safety at Work Amendment Act 2026, which became law on 9 July 2026. This guide gives general information. It is not legal advice. Written to the plain language standard in the Plain Language Act 2022 (s 5).

Most falls start low

WorkSafe's roofs guidelines say "more than 50 percent of falls are from less than three metres", and "most of these falls are from ladders and roofs".



4
deaths a year from falls, on average

100
serious injuries a year

1,000
injuries a year that need more than a week off work

Around 40% of falls from height happen in construction. In construction, ladders play a part in about 40% of fall injuries. Falls from or through a building cause the most deaths and very serious injuries.

No height is safe

WorkSafe says: "In New Zealand, there is no minimum height threshold for working at height – any fall risk from any height must be managed." Short jobs count too: "Short duration work at height must be treated the same way as any other activity at height."

Sources WorkSafe, Working on roofs guidelines, s 1; media release, WorkSafe's focus on residential construction sites aims to prevent falls from height (2 October 2026); Working at height in New Zealand (August 2026), ss 1.4, 1.6.

What the law asks

The main duty in the Act covers falls from any height. Older rules that are still in force add duties at 3 and 5 metres.

Rule	What it asks of you
The main duty **ss 30, 36**	Keep workers and others safe so far as is reasonably practicable: what you can reasonably do, once you weigh up the risk, what you know, and the controls that exist (s 22). Remove the risk if you can. If you can't, reduce it.
Falls of more than 3 metres **1995 Regulations, reg 21**	Where an employee may fall more than 3 metres, the employer must provide suitable means to prevent the fall, so far as is reasonably practicable. This rule does not apply to agricultural work.
Notifiable work: 5 metres **1995 Regulations, regs 2, 26**	Tell WorkSafe at least 24 hours before starting work where someone could fall 5 metres or more. Exceptions include houses up to two storeys, work done only from a ladder, and minor routine maintenance.
Scaffolding: 5 metres **1995 Regulations, regs 2, 53**	Tell WorkSafe at least 24 hours before putting up or taking down scaffolding where someone could fall 5 metres or more. Scaffolding 5 metres or more above the ground needs a scaffolder with a current certificate of competence.

"Employer" and "employee"

Reg 21 comes from the older law, so it uses the words employer and employee, not PCBU and worker. If you employ people, read it as applying to you. The main duty in the Act covers everyone else on site.

Below 3 metres, the duty still applies

The 3-metre rule is an extra duty for employers. It does not switch off the main duty for lower falls. The 1995 Regulations were kept when the Act replaced the old law in 2016, and the 2027 changes point back to reg 21.

Sources the Act, ss 30, 36; Health and Safety in Employment Regulations 1995, regs 2, 21, 26, 53; WorkSafe, Particular hazardous work.

Falls in the new law

From 1 April 2027, the law names working at height as a critical risk. The Amendment Act became law on 9 July 2026.

Working at height and scaffolding are listed

New Schedule 1A lists "working at heights (see regulation 21)" and scaffolding, including putting it up and taking it down. WorkSafe's examples are "any work where a person could fall more than 3 metres" and work on scaffolding.

Lower falls can be critical too

Any hazard likely to cause death or a notifiable injury is also a critical risk. Serious head injuries and spinal injuries are notifiable injuries (s 23).

Many falls from under 3 metres will meet that test.

If you have fewer than 20 workers

You are a small PCBU. If numbers vary, you are small if you expect fewer than 20 in at least 9 months of the year. **new s 17(3) to (5)** Your main duties (ss 36 to 43) then cover only critical risks, the falls described above. Welfare, notifying WorkSafe and consulting workers (ss 56, 58) still apply. **new s 25A**

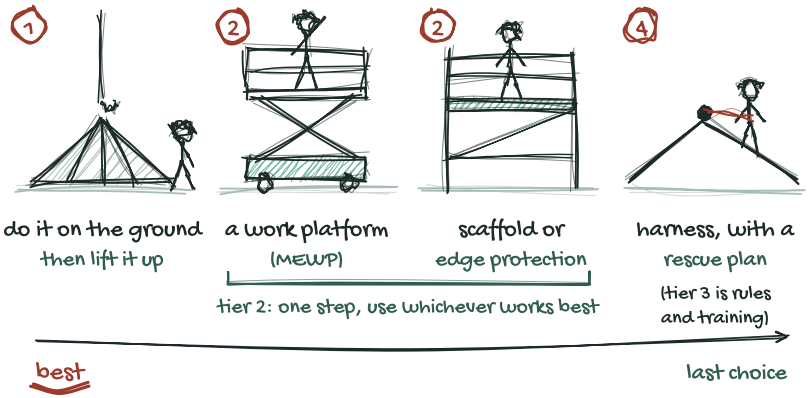
Getting ready

- [ ] List every job where someone works off the ground, including ladder work and five-minute jobs.
- [ ] For each one, write down what stops the fall. If the answer is "they're careful", that is the gap.
- [ ] Check who holds scaffolding certificates, and when they expire.
- [ ] Ask your contractors how they will meet the same duty.

Sources the Amendment Act 2026 (new ss 17(3) to (5), 22A, 25A, Schedule 1A); the Act, s 23; WorkSafe, What is a critical risk? and Managing critical risks for small PCBUs (September 2026).

Best controls first

WorkSafe says "you should use the highest-level control measure that is reasonably practicable". Start with tier 1, and move to a lower tier only when you must.



The order of controls, in tiers	Examples
1 Remove the risk	Build at ground level and lift into place. Use long-reach tools from the ground.
2 Substitute, isolate or engineer (one tier)	A MEWP instead of a ladder. Scaffolding, edge protection (a barrier that stops people, tools or materials falling from an edge), guardrails, safety nets, covers over holes.
3 Administrative controls	Permits, exclusion zones, supervision and training.
4 Protective equipment	Harnesses, with travel restraint (stops you reaching the edge) ahead of fall arrest (catches you after you fall).

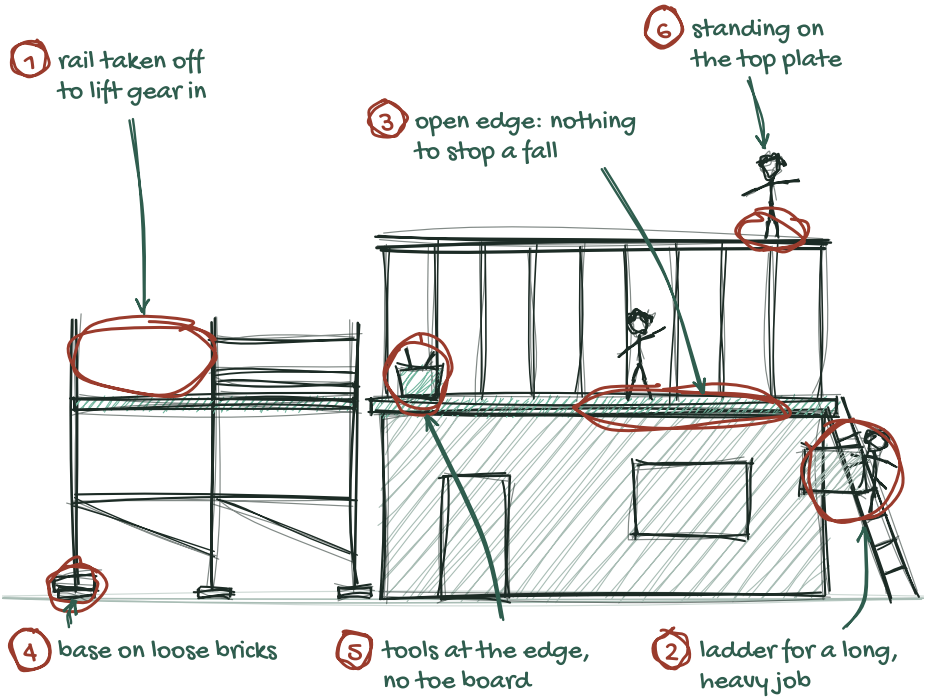
WorkSafe lists training with the administrative controls. WorkSafe recommends controls that don't rely on a worker's judgement.

Training supports the other controls. It helps people use rails, platforms and harnesses well. On its own, it is one of the weakest controls.

Sources General Risk and Workplace Management Regulations 2016, reg 6; WorkSafe, Working at height in New Zealand (August 2026), tables 2 and 3; media release (17 April 2025).

What to look for

Many fall risks are visible from the ground. Learn them on one site and you will see them everywhere.



The numbers match the table on the next page. The same checks work on a mezzanine, a truck deck or a shop roof.

Six things to spot

	What it looks like	Why it matters, and what to do	Priority
1	A scaffold bay with its guardrail missing.	It came off to lift gear in, and nothing made sure it went back. Refit it before anyone works there. Then ask who removes rails, and who puts them back.	●●●
2	A ladder used for a long or heavy job.	Ladders "do not offer any protection from a fall". WorkSafe says to use them for "low-risk and short-duration tasks". Get a platform or scaffold.	●●○
3	An open floor or roof edge.	Nothing stops a fall. Fit edge protection before anyone works near it.	●●●
4	A scaffold standing on bricks, blocks or soft ground.	The base can sink or shift. Ask the scaffolder to fix it. Look for base plates on a solid sole board.	●●○
5	Tools or materials at an edge with no toe board.	They can fall on people below. Fit toe boards, and keep people out from under the work.	●●○
6	Someone standing on a wall top plate, the top timber of a wall frame.	WorkSafe says: "At no time is any person to stand on or work from an external wall top plate without suitable fall protection."	●●●

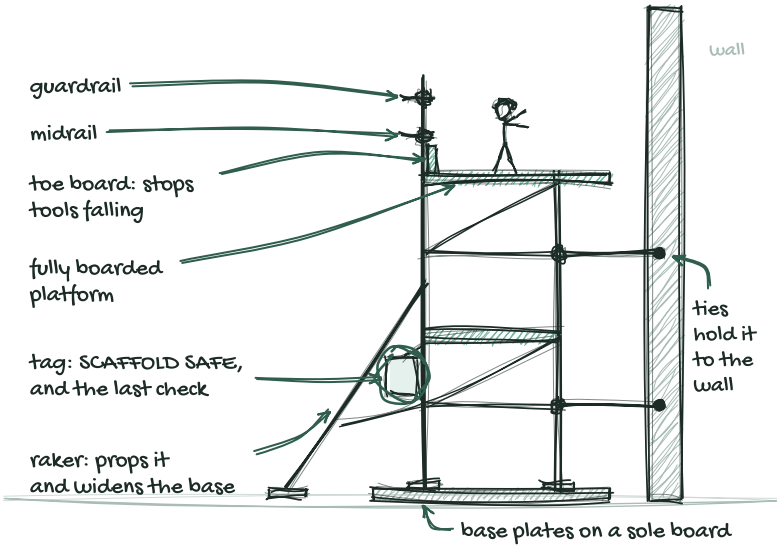
Try it this week

Stand at the gate of one site for ten minutes with this page. Find all six. Then ask the crew which one they would fix first. They often know a seventh.

Sources WorkSafe, Working at height in New Zealand (August 2026); Safe working with ladders and stepladders (May 2022); Working safely at height fact sheets.

A complete scaffold

You don't need to be a scaffolder to see whether a scaffold looks complete.



What the tag should show

WorkSafe says "all scaffolds, regardless of height, should have a tag" where people get on. The tag shows:

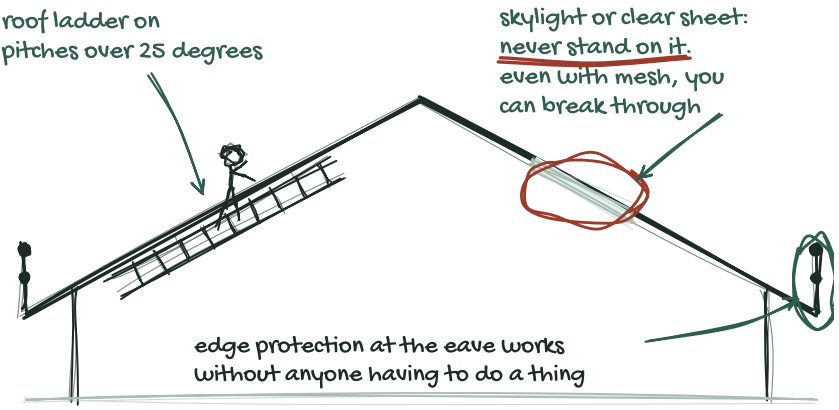
- whether the scaffold is safe, such as "SCAFFOLD SAFE" or "SCAFFOLD UNSAFE"
- the name and phone number of the certified scaffolder (or whoever put it up, if it is under 5 metres)
- what it is for, and how much load it can take
- a record of each inspection. WorkSafe says these "should be done weekly or after a significant storm or earthquake".

Sources WorkSafe, Working at height in New Zealand (August 2026), s 4.1.

See also WorkSafe's Scaffolding in New Zealand guidelines for the detail.

Ladders and roofs

A few habits prevent many falls from ladders and roofs.



Ladders

- Ladders "should be the last form of work access equipment to be considered".
- Keep "three points of contact" with the ladder.
- Secure it at the top and bottom so it can't slip.

Roofs

- "No access to brittle roofing is permitted until adequate hazard controls have been implemented."
- "Never stand on translucent or clear sheeting."
- Do "as much preparation work as possible on the ground".

Weather changes the job

Rain, wind and frost make roofs and ladders far more dangerous. After the Prowash fall, WorkSafe said work should be postponed if conditions are not favourable. Agree before the job who decides to stop.

Sources WorkSafe, Working at height in New Zealand (August 2026); Safe working with ladders and stepladders (May 2022); Working on roofs guidelines; Working safely at height fact sheets; media release (17 April 2025).

Harnesses need a rescue

A harness is the last choice, not the first. When you do use one, plan how to get someone down before anyone clips on.



- "A fall arrest system should be considered only when a travel restraint system is not reasonably practicable to use."
- Suspension intolerance is "a condition where blood pooling in the legs can lead to loss of consciousness". So "it is critical that a suspended worker can be rescued quickly".
- "A rescue plan should be developed before installing the harness system."
- WorkSafe says you should have "documented rescue plans, with on-site personnel trained in the rescue plans".

Ask about the rescue

Ask the crew: if someone fell now, who would get them down, with what, and how long would it take? If nobody can answer, the harness system isn't ready to use.

Sources WorkSafe, Working at height in New Zealand (August 2026), ss 1.7, 4.6.

The wet roof: what the court found

Page 2 told what happened to the worker in April 2023. WorkSafe's investigation found the business had not managed the risks.



April 2023
A worker falls about 6 metres from a wet roof.

Then
He spends six months in hospital.

15 April 2025
Wellington District Court sentences Prowash Wellington Limited.

17 April 2025
WorkSafe calls for controls that don't rely on a worker's judgement.

What was missing	What it looked like
Edge protection	There was only limited edge protection on the roofline.
A harness system	None was in use. He had no formal training on harnesses or roof anchors.
Training	He had no experience or training in working at height.
Planning for the conditions	Nobody managed the risk of working in rain on a new iron roof with cleaning product on it.
A system	The business could not show WorkSafe any policies, or a process for finding and controlling risks.

The sentence

The court fined the company $40,000. It also ordered $77,456 reparation to the worker. The charge was under ss 36(1)(a) and 48. The maximum fine for this charge is $1.5 million.

The lesson for leaders

The rain, the roof and the new worker were all known before the job started. The decisions that mattered were made on the ground: what protection to put up, and whether to go up at all.

Sources WorkSafe media release, Worker's six metre fall prompts industry call out (17 April 2025); the Act, ss 36, 48.

Two cases where nobody fell

A notice ignored: Grace Motors Ltd (Grace Construction)

In August 2024, WorkSafe found unprotected second-floor edges and unsecured ladders at a building site in Kelston. It issued a prohibition notice. Work carried on anyway over the next week.

In August 2026 the Waitakere District Court fined the company $38,500 for not complying with the notice (s 107). WorkSafe said: "Working at height cannot be treated as business-as-usual until something goes wrong."

A scaffold with no ties: Kylin Scaffolding Ltd

In January 2024, on a windy day, a 9-metre scaffold for new townhouses fell onto Peach Parade in Remuera. Three workers were nearby, and drivers swerved to avoid it. The scaffold was not tied to the building and had no rakers. The company had not assessed the risks.

On 3 September 2025 the Auckland District Court ordered $8,500 reparation. WorkSafe's release does not report a fine or explain the amount. The charge was under ss 36(2) and 48. WorkSafe said "rakers, ties, and risk assessments are essential, not optional".

Lesson	What it means for leaders
A notice means stop	Make sure your sites stop when WorkSafe tells them to, and that crews know why.
Check the scaffold, not the paperwork	Look for ties, rakers and a current tag before anyone uses it (page 10).
Nobody needs to fall	WorkSafe acts on the risk, not just the harm.

Sources WorkSafe media releases, Company falls short after ignoring WorkSafe notice (4 September 2026); Collapsed scaffolding had basic safety flaws (4 September 2025); the Act, ss 36, 48, 107.

When the work changes

The same roof or scaffold needs a different approach depending on what is happening. Field guide 1 explains why.

What is happening	How to manage it	Priority
Fixed walkways, a scaffold that stays up for months Clear	Inspect regularly. Keep rails in place. Make sure nobody removes them "just for a minute".	●○○
A brittle roof, a tall or unusual scaffold Complicated	Get competent design and a certified scaffolder. Plan the rescue before work starts.	●●○
A busy site where trades and weather change every day Complex	Keep edge protection fixed. Walk the site daily. Ask each crew what has changed.	●●○
A fall, a scaffold collapse, someone hanging in a harness Chaotic	Make the area safe. Rescue fast. Call 111. Then report and keep the site as it is (field guide 5).	Act now
Nobody knows who checks the edge protection Confusion	Stop work at height until one person is named as responsible.	●●○

Clear to Chaotic: "it's only a quick job"

A two-minute task goes ahead from a ladder or an open edge. Short jobs skip the planning, but a fall doesn't care how long the job was meant to take.

Complex to Chaotic: the weather turns

Rain arrives, the deadline doesn't move, and work carries on. The Prowash fall happened on a wet roof.

Sources The situation names in colour come from the Cynefin framework (Snowden and Boone, 2007, who called Clear "Simple" and Confusion "Disorder"; current names from Snowden and Friends, 2021).

Signs worth a closer look

Most of these signs are visible as you walk onto site.

What you might see or hear	What to do	Priority
"It's only five minutes." A ladder used for a long or heavy task.	Stop. Get the right access equipment.	●●●
A gap in a guardrail or edge protection.	Restore it before work goes on. Find out why it came off, and what would keep it on.	●●●
Wet roofs, strong wind or frost, with a deadline pushing.	Postpone the work. Back the person who calls it.	●●●
A new roof type, skylights or a taller structure.	Re-plan the method. Get specialist advice.	●●○
A scaffold tag that is missing, out of date or says unsafe.	Keep people off until a competent person checks it.	●●○
Harnesses on site, but nobody can explain the rescue.	Pause harness work until there is a rescue plan.	●●○

The ladder test

Pick any ladder in use. Ask the person on it what the job is and how long it will take. Then ask what they would use if the ladder wasn't there. The answer is often the better option.

Height on the job

It is 7 am. Rain is due by ten. The roofers want the last sheets on before it arrives, and the client keeps ringing. What you decide now tells the crew what matters here.

Before work starts

- [ ] Plan to do as much work as possible on the ground.
- [ ] Check scaffolds and edge protection are complete, with a current tag (page 10).
- [ ] Make sure anyone using a harness is trained, and a rescue plan is ready.

While work is happening

- [ ] Look up, every time you walk the site.
- [ ] Don't let anyone remove a guardrail without a plan to replace it.
- [ ] Stop work at height when the weather turns.

Afterwards

- [ ] Report near misses at height, including dropped objects.
- [ ] Tell your manager about any access problem you can't fix without more money or time.
- [ ] Check scaffolds again after changes or bad weather.

Stopping is the job

Postponing work because of rain or missing edge protection is not a failure. It is the control working.

Contracts decide falls

If the price or programme leaves no room for scaffolding, the risk was chosen before work started. Field guide 3 covers working with contractors.

Take these to your next meeting

Senior leaders and officers

- [ ] Where do our people work at height, at any height?
- [ ] Do our prices and programmes allow for scaffolding and edge protection?
- [ ] How often do we rely on ladders and harnesses?
- [ ] Do we have rescue plans wherever people use harnesses?
- [ ] Do we notify WorkSafe of work where someone could fall 5 metres or more?
- [ ] Who can stop work for weather, and do we back them?
- [ ] Is working at height on our critical risk list?
- [ ] As an officer, how do I check for myself that edge protection and scaffolds are provided and used? (s **44**)

Middle managers

- [ ] Could this job be done from the ground?
- [ ] Is every edge protected today?
- [ ] Who checked the scaffold, and when?
- [ ] Is anyone using a ladder for a long or heavy task?
- [ ] Is anyone new to working at height on site?
- [ ] What will we do if the weather turns?
- [ ] How fast could we rescue someone in a harness?

Two measures a board can track edges with fixed protection checked this month; ladder or roof jobs started without a plan.

Notes

Which of our jobs at height depends on nothing more than someone being careful?

Field notes

Back of your pocket card

My critical risks here:

Who to call:

ideas for this page:

- edges you saw with no rail
- ladders in use, and for what
- who decides to stop for weather
- scaffold tags: date of last check
- what the crew said slows them

→ write it down here

Pocket card

Cut out and fold in half.

Before anyone goes up

1. Can we do it on the ground?
2. Platform or scaffold, not just a ladder?
3. Is every edge protected?
4. Does the scaffold tag show a recent check?
5. Harness? Then a rescue plan, ready.

Any height counts.

Stop and re-plan if

- rain, wind or frost arrives
- a rail or edge protection is missing
- the tag is missing or says unsafe
- nobody can explain the rescue
- WorkSafe issues a notice

Stopping is the job.

Card text from pages 7 to 12 and 16. Field guide 8, Vimes Consulting.

Key words

The words people use on site, in plain English.

Word	What it means
Reasonably practicable	What you can reasonably do, once you weigh up the risk, what you know, and the controls that exist. Cost is weighed last. It can rule a step out only if it is grossly disproportionate to the risk. s 22
Edge protection	A barrier that stops people, tools or materials falling from an edge.
Guardrail, midrail, toe board	The top rail, the middle rail and the low board along an edge. Together they stop people and tools going over (page 10).
Tie	A fixing that holds a scaffold to the building.
Raker	A sloping prop that widens a scaffold's base, so it is more stable.
Scaffold tag	A sign where you get onto a scaffold. It shows whether the scaffold is safe to use, who put it up, and when it was last checked.
Top plate	The top timber of a wall frame. People stand on it to reach the roof, and fall from it.
Brittle roofing	Roofing that will not hold a person at every point, such as plastic or glass sheets, skylights and asbestos cement.
MEWP	A mobile elevating work platform, such as a scissor lift or boom lift.
Travel restraint, fall arrest	Two harness systems. Travel restraint stops you reaching the edge. Fall arrest catches you after you fall.
Suspension intolerance	When someone hangs in a harness, blood pools in their legs. They can lose consciousness.
Critical risk	From 1 April 2027, a risk the law lists, or one likely to cause death or a notifiable injury. Working at height is listed. new s 22A

Sources the Act, s 22; WorkSafe, Working at height in New Zealand (August 2026) and Working on roofs guidelines; WorkSafe media release (4 September 2025) on rakers; the Amendment Act 2026 (new s 22A).

Check it yourself

How this guide was checked

Every statement of law or fact in this guide was checked against a primary source before printing: the Act, the regulations, the Amendment Act 2026 as passed, WorkSafe guidance, or WorkSafe's case reports. Each check is recorded in a claims register, with the source and date checked. Statements that could not be checked were removed. Facts checked on 12, 22, 23 and 24 October 2026.

Law

1. Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, ss 22, 23, 30, 36, 44, 48, 56, 58, 107. legislation.govt.nz
2. Health and Safety in Employment Regulations 1995, regs 2, 21, 26, 53.
3. Health and Safety at Work (General Risk and Workplace Management) Regulations 2016, reg 6.
4. Health and Safety at Work Amendment Act 2026 (became law on 9 July 2026): new ss 17(3) to (5), 22A, 25A and Schedule 1A.
5. Plain Language Act 2022, s 5.

WorkSafe guidance and data

6. Working at height in New Zealand: good practice guidelines (August 2026); Working safely at height fact sheets; Working on roofs guidelines; Safe working with ladders and stepladders (May 2022); Equipment for working at height.
7. Scaffolding in New Zealand: good practice guidelines (November 2016); Particular hazardous work; Overview of work-related harm and risk in Aotearoa New Zealand (June 2024).
8. What is a critical risk?; Managing critical risks for small PCBUs (September 2026).
9. Media releases: 17 April 2025 (Prowash); 4 September 2025 (Kylin Scaffolding); 4 September 2026 (Grace Motors); 2 October 2026 (residential falls). worksafe.govt.nz

Research

10. Snowden, D. J., and Boone, M. E. (2007). A leader's framework for decision making. Harvard Business Review, 85(11), 68 to 76. The Cynefin framework, with Clear called 'Simple' and Confusion 'Disorder'.
11. Snowden, D., and Friends (2021). *Cynefin: Weaving sense-making into the fabric of our world*. Cognitive Edge, The Cynefin Co. The current situation names on page 15.

Other guides that help

Falls touch most of the series.

Guide	Read it for
1	Leading health and safety, and why the same task needs a different approach in different situations.
3	Shared duties, when contractors and other trades share your site.
4	Worker voice. How to make it normal for crews to stop work and speak up.
5	When things go wrong. What to do in the first hour after someone falls.
6	Critical risks and critical controls, in full.
12	Asbestos, including old cement roofing that can't hold a person's weight.

The whole series

1 Leading health and safety · 2 Trust and verify · 3 Shared duties · 4 Worker voice · 5 When things go wrong · 6 Critical risks and critical controls · 7 Vehicles, mobile plant and traffic · **8 Working at height** · 9 Psychosocial risk and mental health · 10 Work-related health · 11 Hazardous substances · 12 Asbestos · 13 Machinery, plant and energy isolation · 14 Remote, isolated and lone work

Sources

Working at height in one minute

- Any height counts. More than half of falls are from under 3 metres.
- Plan the height out first. Do the work on the ground where you can.
- Edge protection and scaffolding come before harnesses.
- A harness needs a rescue plan before anyone clips on.
- Read the scaffold tag. Look for a recent check.
- When the weather turns, put work at height off.

The field guides

1 Leading health and safety
2 Trust and verify
3 Shared duties
4 Worker voice
5 When things go wrong
6 Critical risks and critical controls
7 Vehicles, mobile plant and traffic
8 Working at height
9 Psychosocial risk and mental health
10 Work-related health
11 Hazardous substances
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13 Machinery, plant and energy isolation
14 Remote, isolated and lone work



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