

Working at height for lone workers

Is the risk to lone workers managed enough?

Falls are one of the most common causes of workplace injury and death. Each year, around 684,000 people die globally due to falls ([WHO](#)). Lone workers, however, - face an increased risk as they often work at height without immediate support.

A lone worker is someone who may operate alone, in isolation, or without direct supervision. When working at height, being alone increases the potential risks, making lone working job planning, risk assessments, and emergency procedures essential to staying safe.

Risks associated with lone working at height

Working at height can be a high-risk activity. When undertaken alone, the risks can be harder to control. Lone workers don't have immediate access to help, support, or safety supervision. If something goes wrong, the consequences can be severe or even fatal. The potential risks posed to lone workers working at height include:

- Falls from height - Lone workers are more vulnerable to falls caused by unchecked, unstable or unsafe platforms, missing guardrails, or failure to use fall protection system correctly. Without a colleague to check or report these issues, errors or oversights may go unnoticed.
- Equipment failures - Ladders, scaffolding, and fall arrest systems can fail. When working alone, there's no one to check if equipment is set up correctly or to assist if something breaks or malfunctions mid-task.
- Environmental hazards- Environmental conditions such as strong winds, poor visibility, or extreme temperatures further increase danger. Lone workers may feel pressure to continue working despite unsafe conditions, especially if facing tight deadlines, which can lead to poor decision-making and greater risk.
- Medical emergencies - Sudden illness, dizziness, or fainting while working at height can quickly become life-threatening if no one is nearby to help or call the emergency team for assistance.

How to manage working at height for lone working

Avoid working alone at height - never send a lone worker to do high-risk work at height activities

Plan work at ground level – Eliminate as far as practicable or reduce the need to work at height. Prepare materials and tools at ground level wherever possible. Use extendable tools or alternative methods to complete tasks without climbing.

Assess and reassess the risks -

Before starting work:

- Carry out a risk assessment that covers both working at height and lone working.
- Reassess regularly. Conditions like weather, site layout, fatigue, or workload can quickly increase risk.

Provide the right equipment

Always use the most suitable fall prevention or fall arrest systems. This may include:

- Scaffolding
- MEWPs (Mobile Elevated Work Platforms)
- Mobile towers
- Full fall arrest systems with harnesses, lanyards, and secure anchor points

Inspect all equipment regularly and before each use. Damaged or worn gear must be replaced immediately.

Ensure the Competence of Lone Workers

Only trained, experienced, and competent workers should perform solo work at height. Take extra care with:

- New employees
- Young or disabled workers
- Anyone unfamiliar with the site or the specific task

Train and Educate

Train lone workers to understand the involved risks, safety equipment, WAH safety procedures, and emergency response procedures.

Set up a reliable check-in system

Use a scheduled check-in system with:

- Phones or two-way radios
- Backup communication methods where signal is weak (e.g. GPS, satellite devices, or duress alarms)

Ensure devices are always fully charged and within reach. Use systems with live monitoring, real-time alerts, and escalation protocols to ensure quick action in case of trouble.

Provide On-Site Support When Needed

Lone workers may need support when they are:

- New to the job or location
- Still undergoing training
- Facing unusual or complex situations
- Working at particularly hazardous heights

Assign a buddy or supervisor during high-risk or unfamiliar tasks

Schedule Smart

Plan high-risk work during business hours or when others are nearby. Avoid scheduling lone work at height when help is harder to access, such as early mornings, late evenings, or weekends.

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Infosheet for Occupational Safety and Health professionals (OSH)

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Carry out a thorough risk assessment

This is a core requirement for managing lone workers. When it involves work at height, risk assessment becomes even more critical. Key steps include:

- Hazard Identification- Conduct a detailed task analysis to identify what could harm a lone worker when working at height, considering the specific environment, tools, and activities.
- Risk evaluation: Assess the likelihood and severity of falls and other potential incidents. Consider how other risks, like poor weather, equipment failure, or restricted communication, could increase danger when the worker is alone.
- Control measures: Implement measures to eliminate or minimise risks. This could include restrictions on lone working in certain conditions, provision of secure platforms, as well as fall arrest systems.
- Ongoing review: Regularly revisit and update risk assessments to ensure they reflect the actual tasks being performed and current conditions.

Train and develop safe working at height practices

Training is essential for preparing lone workers to understand and manage risks. OSH professionals should ensure training programmes cover:

- Risk Awareness - Educate lone workers about risks specific to their roles and the nature of their work environment.
- Safety procedures - Provide practical training on work at height safety protocols, including use of fall protection systems and safe work practices at height.
- Emergency response- Equip workers with the knowledge to respond effectively to incidents, including first aid, communication protocols, and emergency evacuation.
- Use of safety equipment- Train staff in the correct use of personal safety devices, such as alarms, harnesses, and communication tools

Lead the development of a comprehensive Lone Working Policy

An effective lone-working policy is essential for ensuring consistency and clarity in managing lone worker safety. OSH professionals should contribute to and guide the development of a policy.

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Lone working involves additional risks. For lone workers, there is a need to take extra steps to protect their own health and safety by:

Know the risks before the start of the activity

Before beginning any lone work, especially high-risk tasks like working at height, speak to the duty holder or relevant occupational safety and Health professional. Ask about site-specific hazards and risks. Request to review the registered Risk Assessment and make sure the risk assessment findings and control measures are well understood. Never start a task until you understand what it involves and how to do it safely.

Stay aware and proactive

Lone workers should always be alert to their surroundings. Identify hazards early and take action to avoid them. Follow safe work practices, and don't take shortcuts or unnecessary risks.

For workers, it is also imperative to speak up when they notice the absence of controls.

Follow health and safety procedures

Stick to the employer's health and safety procedures at all times. This includes safe systems of work, emergency protocols, and incident reporting rules.

Use safety equipment correctly

It is important for lone workers to only use tools and equipment they are trained to operate.

Ensure a secure means of communication

To get support from a backup team, make sure a reliable source of communication is in place. For lone workers, it is also essential to check the communication devices' signal coverage and battery.

Further resources

Health and Safety Executive. "Protecting lone workers How to manage the risks of working alone". Available at: [Lone working: Protect those working alone - HSE](#)

Canadian Centre for Occupational Safety and Health "Working Alone". Available at: [CCOHS: Working Alone - General](#)

IOSH Magazine (Don Cameron, 2023) "Minimising the safety risks to lone workers". Available at: <https://www.ioshmagazine.com/2023/06/19/minimising-safety-risks-lone-workers>
IOSH Magazine (Peter Crush, 2023) "The growth of lone working". Available at: <https://www.ioshmagazine.com/2023/11/01/growth-lone-working>

Working at height for lone workers

Infosheet for organisations

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Call to action for organisations

- Establish and maintain a Lone Worker Policy aligned with legal and operational requirements.
- Carry out a documented risk assessment before any lone work at height activity begins.
- Provide thorough training and effective supervision tailored to lone working conditions.
- Implement clear communication protocols and emergency response systems for lone workers.
- Cultivate a workplace culture that prioritises lone worker safety and wellbeing

Golden rules for working at height alone

- Avoid or minimise working at height and lone working where there are reasonable, practicable alternatives.
- Include lone working in all risk assessments where it is planned or foreseeable that lone working will occur, specifically for high-risk activities such as work at height.
- Clearly define which activities can and cannot be carried out by lone workers, based on the findings of the risk assessments.
- Introduce suitable safe lone working arrangements, including communications and access to assistance, for both normal working and foreseeable emergencies.
- Assess the suitability of people for lone working, taking account of their competence, experience and any medical conditions which may place them at additional risk.
- Provide all people undertaking lone working with suitable information and training in the safe arrangements for the work, including permitted activities, approved working procedures, communication or monitoring arrangements, and emergency procedures.
- Provide suitable equipment, as well as an appropriate level of monitoring and supervision, based on the findings of the risk assessment.

Further resources

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