Keep your balance

Make sure all portable ladders – whether manufacturer or job-made – are secure and in the right position.

The accident: An employee was climbing a 10-foot ladder to access a landing that was 9 feet above the adjacent floor. The ladder slid down, and the employee fell to the floor, sustaining fatal injuries. Although the ladder had slip-resistant feet, it was not secured, and the railings did not extend 3 feet above the landing.

The bottom line: You risk falling if portable ladders are not safely positioned each time they are used. While you are on a ladder, it may move and slip from its supports. You can also lose your balance while getting on or off an unsteady ladder. Falls from ladders can cause injuries ranging from sprains to death.

To avoid hazards, do the following:

- Position portable ladders so the side rails extend at least 3 feet above the landing.
- Secure side rails at the top to a rigid support and use a grab device when a 3-foot extension is not possible.
- Make sure the weight of the ladder will not cause it to slip off its support.
- Before each use inspect ladders for cracked or broken parts such as rungs, steps, side rails, feet and locking components.
- Do not apply more weight on the ladder than it is designed to support. Self-supporting (foldout) and non-self-supporting (leaning) portable ladders must be able to support at least four times the maximum intended load, except extra heavy-duty metal or plastic ladders, which must be able to sustain 3.3 times the maximum intended load. Leaning ladders are to be positioned at such an angle that the horizontal distance from the top support to the foot of the ladder is about one-quarter the working length of the ladder. In the case of job-made wooden ladders, that angle should equal about one-eighth the working length. This minimizes the strain of the load on ladder joints that may not be as strong as on commercially manufactured ladders.
- Use only ladders that comply with OSHA design standards. **EW**

Illustration by Don Lomax

Source: OSHA's Construction eTool website, osha.gov/SLTC/etools/construction.