

Tips: Ladder safety

In 2003, more than 527,000 people were treated in hospital emergency rooms, doctors' offices, clinics and other medical settings because of injuries related to ladder use, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. Most injuries were cuts, bruises and fractured bones.

"Accidents happen, but by knowing how to properly use and set-up a ladder, you can reduce the chance of falling or being involved in other ladder-related accidents," said Robert W. Bucholz, M.D., president of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. "It is important that only one person be on the ladder at a time and that the weight your ladder is supporting does not exceed its maximum load capacity."

Staying safe on a ladder can be made easier if you follow these tips developed by the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons:

- Inspect the ladder. Check the ladder for any loose screws, hinges or rungs that might not have been fixed from its last usage. Clean off any mud or other liquids that might have accumulated on the ladder.
- Properly set up the ladder. Every ladder should be placed on a firm, level surface. Never place a ladder on ground that is uneven and watch for soft, muddy spots. The same is true for uneven flooring. Remember to always engage the ladder locks or braces before climbing. If working outside, make sure the ladder will not hit electrical wires, tree limbs or any other obstructions when it is extended.
- Remember the 1-to-4 rule: the bottom of the ladder should be 1 foot away from the wall for every 4 feet that the ladder rises. For example, if the ladder touches the wall 16 feet above the ground, the feet of the ladder should be 4 feet from the wall. If you are going to climb onto a roof, the ladder should extend at least 3 feet higher than the roof. And, the upper and lower sections of an extension ladder should overlap to provide stability.
- Do not use a ladder as a seat between tasks. You might want to take a break from your chores, but never use a stepladder's top or pail shelf as a seat.
- Select the right ladder for the job. If you're washing windows inside the home, choose a step stool or utility ladder -- they're often used when working at low or medium heights. Extension ladders are ideal for use outdoors to reach high places like cleaning the gutters on the roof of a house.
- Move materials with caution when on the ladder. While cleaning the garage or closet, be careful when pushing or pulling items from shelves. You could lose your balance and fall.
- Always reposition the ladder closer to the work. Over-reaching or leaning far to one side when on the ladder could make you lose your balance and fall. Your bellybutton should not go beyond the sides of the ladder!
- Wear proper footwear. Make sure your shoelaces are tied and the soles of your shoes are free of any greasy, oily or wet substances. Do not wear leather-soled shoes -- they are slippery! Pant legs shouldn't be too wide or too long.

- Be careful when climbing; get help if you need it. Be safe, ask someone to hold the ladder while you climb. Stay in the center of the ladder as you climb, and always hold the side rails with both hands.

Internet users can find additional safety tips and injury prevention information on ladder safety and more, in the Prevent Injuries America!® Program section of the Academy's Web site, www.aaos.org or www.orthoinfo.org.