

Forklifts: 7 Tips for Keeping Workers Safe

Most workplaces couldn't do without forklifts. But they certainly could do without forklift accidents and the resulting injuries. These tips can help keep both forklift operators and pedestrians safe.

-A truck driver from Iowa delivered new light poles to the football field at Frontier High School in Bakersfield, CA. He was watching another worker unload the poles with a forklift when the load shifted. A pole fell and hit him in the stomach, fatally injuring him.

-A farm worker from Kettleman City, CA, walked around behind his forklift only to be crushed against it by another forklift driver who was backing up.

-A forklift driver in Arvin, CA, was killed when he walked in front of his forklift and his raised load of carrots fell on him.

These three accounts all tell essentially the same story: If you have forklifts in your workplace, you have a hazard.

The following safety tips can help you address some of the most dangerous circumstances and keep your forklift operators and other workers safe:

Tip 1: No unauthorized operators. Forklift operators must have special training that is specific to both the workplace and the type of forklift they will be operating. Unauthorized workers operating forklifts-such as an employee who jumps on the forklift to move an item "just to help out"-are extremely dangerous to themselves and others. Make sure that all of your workers know that only trained operators can operate forklifts. Also, be sure workers under age 18 know that it is illegal for minors to operate forklifts.

Tip 2: Handle with care. The forklift itself is a hazard, but the load can be, too. Train operators and other workers to stack and secure the load so that it will not shift during transport. When the forklift is in motion, the load should be carried as close to the ground as possible.

Tip 3: Keep clear of the load. A raised load on a forklift is just like any other raised load—a hazard to anyone close enough to be struck by it if it falls. Emphasize to forklift operators and other workers that they have to stay clear of raised loads—not just out from under them but out from in front of them and a clear distance to the side, too. That distance may need to be larger as the load is raised higher.

Tip 4: Use the right forklift. The forklift has to be made for the conditions it will be used in—indoor, outdoor, or both; rough terrain or smooth concrete; or potentially flammable atmospheres. Even the load must be considered when choosing a forklift, such as how much the load weighs and how the load will need to be maneuvered.

Tip 5: Know the territory. Terrain affects forklift balance and handling; for example, even a pothole can be a tip-over hazard under unfortunate circumstances. Forklift operators need to know how to safely navigate up and down slopes and around corners, both with and without a load. If they work outdoors they also need to know how to deal with weather conditions. Workers who will be loading and unloading trucks or railcars need to know how to secure dock plates and bridge plates.

Tip 6: Maintain visibility. The hazard that kills a forklift operator or other worker could be the one he or she never sees coming. Provide clearly visible markings at edges of loading docks and other areas where forklifts could roll off, along with other precautions such as guardrails and chains. Warn drivers that going from bright light to dim light can blind them just long enough for them to strike another object or person, so they need to take special care under these conditions. Don't stack materials at corners in a way that obstructs an operator's visibility, and use mirrors to show both operators and pedestrians what's coming around the corner.

Tip 7: Separate the men from the machines. The combination of forklifts and workers on foot is a deadly one—usually for the worker on foot. As much as possible, create separate aisles for workers on foot and mechanical equipment. Instruct operators to look in the direction of travel at all times and keep a clear view of where they're going.