WEEK 39 LATE SEPTEMBER · ~5 MIN READ · ONTARIO CONSTRUCTION

Fall Protection Refresher

A worker steps onto a deck to grab one last measurement and unclips to reach around a column. That's when a foot finds the open edge. That's the pattern behind most falls — not a dramatic slip on a risky lift, but a quick, unclipped move on familiar ground.

The hazard

The harness is the last answer, not the first, and that's the part refreshers usually skip. Ontario ranks the methods: a guardrail comes first, and only where a guardrail isn't practicable do you work down the list — travel restraint, then a fall-restricting system, then fall arrest, then a safety net. A crew reaching for harnesses while a guardrail is practicable has skipped the control that actually works.

The trigger isn't only 3 metres. You also need protection where you could fall more than 1.2 m from a work area used as a path for a wheelbarrow or similar equipment, into operating machinery, into water or another liquid, onto or into a hazardous substance or object, or through an opening in a work surface. And separately from all of that: floors — including a mezzanine or balcony — bridge decks, roofs while formwork is in place, and scaffold platforms, runways and ramps need a **guardrail at 2.4 metres or more**. That's lower than the 3 m figure most people carry, and it catches the open floor edge nobody thought was high enough to matter.

What to do

- **Guard it or cover it before you harness anyone.** Where the edge can be guarded or the opening covered, do that. Secure the cover so it can't slide, and mark it.
- **Put guardrails back the moment the task that removed them is done.** Don't leave the gap for whoever comes next — that's the single most common way a protected edge becomes an unprotected one.
- **If personal protection is the answer, use the highest-ranked method that's practicable.** Travel restraint that stops you reaching the edge beats arrest that catches you after you've gone over.
- **Tie off to a proper fixed support — not "something solid."** A permanent anchor installed to the Building Code where it's safe and practical to use one; otherwise a temporary support built for the job, capable of at least **8 kN** for fall arrest, or **6 kN** where a shock absorber is used. A guardrail post, a pipe, a piece of conduit, or a convenient bracket is not an anchor.
- **Do the clearance math before you clip in.** The system has to be arranged so you can't hit the ground, an object, or the level below. Lanyard length, your height, deceleration distance, and sag all eat the space underneath.
- **Inspect before every use:** frayed webbing, cracked buckles, damaged stitching, seized connectors.
- **A system that has arrested a fall comes out of service.** It goes back into use **only if the manufacturer certifies every component is safe to reuse** — that's the manufacturer's call, not a decision to make at the gang box in either direction.
- **Keep working-at-heights training current** — Ontario's approved training is valid for three years, and it doesn't replace site- and equipment-specific instruction for the system you're actually wearing.
- **Have the rescue plan before anyone goes up.** Hanging in a harness is its own emergency and it starts quickly.

Watch out for

- "It's only a quick fix" — most falls happen during short, unclipped tasks near an edge.
- **An open floor edge between 2.4 and 3 metres** that everyone walks past because it's "not high enough."
- Anchoring off to the side instead of overhead — in a fall you swing like a pendulum into whatever's in the arc.
- Leading-edge and skylight work where the fall hazard is behind you and easy to back into.
- A guardrail taken off for one task and never reinstated.

Talk it over

- Where on this site could we put a guardrail or a cover in today, instead of putting someone in a harness?
- Where are the open edges and holes right now — including anything in that 2.4-metre range?
- If someone fell and was hanging in their harness, how would we get them down, and how long would it take?

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