The Three Metre Myth

Why Working at Height Safety Starts Long Before the Fall

There's a common belief on New Zealand worksites that if you're working less than three metres off the ground, you don't need fall protection.

It's a misconception that can have serious consequences.

WorkSafe's updated *Working at Height in New Zealand* guidelines (August 2026) make one thing clear: fall risks must be managed at any height.

Whether it's a roofer near an exposed edge, a maintenance worker on a ladder or someone carrying out a quick repair, the question shouldn't just be how high they are.

It should be: what happens if they fall?

The Three-Metre Rule That Isn't a Rule

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, businesses must manage all fall risks from any height. WorkSafe also recommends physical barriers or fall restraint where a potential fall exceeds one metre.

A fall from a relatively low height can still cause serious injury, particularly onto concrete, equipment or uneven ground.

The risk doesn't begin at three metres. And neither does the responsibility to manage it.

It's Only a Five-Minute Job

We've all heard it. Someone needs to change a fitting, inspect a roof or quickly access something above ground level.

So out comes the ladder.

But a quick job doesn't mean a low-risk job. WorkSafe makes it clear that short-duration work still requires a risk assessment and appropriate controls.

Even everyday equipment like ladders requires careful consideration. Knowing how to select, position and use them safely is an important part of working at height, something also covered in Ladder Awareness training.

A Harness Isn't Always the Answer

When people think about height safety, they often picture someone wearing a harness.

But WorkSafe prioritises eliminating the need to work at height wherever reasonably practicable. Where that isn't possible, safer access methods and physical protection such as scaffolding, edge protection or mobile elevating work platforms (MEWPs) should be considered before relying on fall arrest systems.

And there's another important distinction: Preventing a fall in the first place and stopping a fall once it happens.

If someone is left suspended in a harness, how will they be rescued?

Rescue planning needs to happen before work begins. Practical training, including Heights Rescue, helps workers prepare for situations where a fall arrest system is activated.

Where Workplaces Get Caught Out

Height safety incidents aren't always caused by a lack of equipment. Sometimes it's the planning or understanding that's missing.

Common gaps include:

- Choosing convenience over safety: Using a ladder when a safer working platform is reasonably practicable.
- Assuming experience equals competence: Years on the job don't automatically mean someone understands every risk.
- Overlooking changing conditions: Wind, wet surfaces and unstable ground can quickly change the risks.
- Forgetting the rescue plan: Having fall arrest equipment without a practical way to recover someone.

These are everyday decisions that can have serious consequences.

Training That Goes Beyond Wearing a Harness

Effective height safety training isn't just about equipment. It's about recognising hazards, selecting the right controls and knowing what to do when something goes wrong.

WorkSafe recommends refresher training every two years, with training and supervision appropriate to the work being carried out.

For some workers, Height Safety Introduction provides essential knowledge and practical skills. Others may require Height Safety Advanced or ongoing competency development through Height Safety Refresher.

Ultimately, a certificate is only part of the picture. What matters is whether someone can recognise the risk and make the right decision on the job.

Getting Height Safety Right

Before the next job at height, ask:

Can the work be done from the ground? Is the equipment suitable? Are workers competent? And if something goes wrong, is there a workable rescue plan?

WorkSafe's updated guidance is a timely reminder for New Zealand workplaces to review familiar habits and make sure their approach genuinely manages the risks.

Because the goal isn't simply to stop someone falling three metres.

It's to make sure they don't fall in the first place.

Reference: WorkSafe New Zealand, Working at Height in New Zealand: Good Practice Guidelines, August 2026.

For further information, explore Safety 'n Action's Height Safety Courses.