Each year around 170 people are fatally injured at work and more than 100,000 serious injuries are reported to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

These incidents devastate lives, causing untold suffering and grief – not to mention millions of working days being lost as result and a cost to society of billions of pounds every year. What makes matters worse is that many of these incidents are caused by the same basic health and safety mistakes that have been injuring and killing people for decades. Inspectors routinely spot these failures when visiting workplaces across Britain, and have captured some shocking examples on their cameras.

Poorly maintained or misused ladders
Almost a fifth of reportable falls from height in the workplace are from ladders. Whether poorly maintained, incorrectly used or simply not fit for purpose, it's an issue HSE inspectors come across frequently. If a ladder is the right tool for the job, employers need to ensure it is in a safe condition to use. A ladder is not right for every job. After assessing the risk, it may be that other equipment is more suitable. Ladders are best suited to low risk and short duration work - nobody expects scaffolding for domestic window cleaning.

Dangerous work at height
According to HSE inspectors, more enforcement action is taken to tackle dangerous work at height than any other risk. One in every 12 recordable injuries in Britain’s workplaces are as a result of a fall. Low and high falls kill and seriously injure hundreds of people and account for around 700,000 working days being lost each year. Time and again inspectors see people working on roofs or scaffolding without appropriate safeguards, such as edge protection, fall prevention equipment or
Hi-vis jackets and hard hats will not be much use if these two slip off the roof

harnesses. Falls from height have long been the most common cause of workplace fatalities.

Inadequate safety guards on machines
There are around a dozen deaths and 40,000 injuries each year due to incidents where workers have been using machines, and most of these are easily prevented. HSE inspectors often witness the aftermath of horrific incidents due to poorly maintained or missing guarding on machinery with dangerous moving parts. Workers in machine shops, engineering works, and factories can be put at risk by employers failing to maintain safety devices designed to protect staff on machinery or allowing its removal.

British employers would save around 250,000 work days each year if they could just keep people safe on machinery. Even for survivors, the injuries can be life-changing.

Badly organised workplace transport
Vehicle related incidents in the workplace continue to be a major cause of concern, accounting for about around 50 deaths and over 1500 major injuries a year. Avoiding these injuries is pretty much common sense. For example, following simple rules such as keeping vehicles and people apart around factory spaces and loading areas cuts the risk considerably, as does ensuring loads are properly secured when being moved.

People operating vehicles in workplaces without proper training or qualifications can have tragic consequences, but it is another fault HSE inspectors regularly find.

Exposure to deadly asbestos fibres
Though not used in new construction anymore, asbestos is still present in more than 500,000 public buildings. It is a known and deadly threat that...
still claims in the region of 4500 lives each year (over half of all occupational cancer deaths) of people who were exposed around 35 to 40 years ago. Despite the risk being well known, inspectors still find workers cutting, drilling, sawing and breaking up materials that contain this hidden killer. If inhaled, these airborne fibres can lead to fatal illnesses. HSE prosecutes a number of employers and contractors each year for not taking adequate precautions when removing asbestos. There are stringent rules on asbestos removal for good reason, including restricting who can do the work. Some jobs must only be carried out by licensed, specialist firms.

**Exposure to toxic paint vapours**

Exposure to isocyanates, which is a component of some paints, can cause long-term and sometimes life-threatening illness. That’s why motor-vehicle repair workshops and garages should have strict controls in place. Spray mist containing isocyanate can cause asthma or aggravate existing conditions even with very low exposure and contact with the skin with isocyanate hardeners can cause dermatitis. Vehicle paint sprayers are about 80 times more likely to develop occupational asthma than the rest of the UK working population. Currently there are about 40 to 50 new cases of asthma each year due to isocyanates, mainly in the motor vehicle repair industry and most have to leave the industry. The solution is pretty straightforward – good extraction and suitable masks to help prevent the mist being inhaled.

**Creating clouds of silica dust**

It might not sound like a common risk, but it is estimated that there are currently around 800 lung cancer deaths per year due to long-term exposure to silica dust at work. Inhaling silica dust can also cause silicosis, which is an irreversible lung disease that can take years to develop and can end in a painful death. It’s caused by fine particles of silica which damage and inflames the lungs.

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**Potentially lethal loose asbestos can still be found in loft insulation**

“...asbestos is still present in more than 500,000 public buildings.”

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Father-of-two, Jason Anker, 43, was paralysed at the age of 24 while working for a small roofing firm in the Midlands. He was climbing down a ladder after carrying out repairs to a flat roof when the ladder slipped, and he fell ten feet to the ground below.

He now speaks to businesses all around Britain, to ask that others don’t go through what he did.

He says: “The job had overrun which meant risks were taken and the ladder I used wasn’t tied to the building. The ladder slipped and I remember lying on the ground not feeling my legs. When doctors told me I’d never walk again my whole world caved in.

“I think there’s a temptation for small construction firms to take risks if they’ve got a deadline to meet but I tell them what happened to me could happen to their employees also.”

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Using a spray booth incorrectly, like the one above, can lead to long term ill-health issues like asthma
and leads to the formation of scar tissue (fibrosis). Controlling the dust, which is produced when cutting, blasting or drilling granite, sandstone, slate, brick or concrete, is straightforward using exhaust ventilated tools or ones that have their own water supply. Despite this, inspectors still see the same breaches of law again and again.

**Damage caused by vibrating power tools**

Specialist work often comes with its own unique risks and resulting health conditions. Hand-arm vibration syndrome (HAVS) and vibration related carpal tunnel syndrome are usually caused by using hand-held power tools and hand fed and guided machinery. HAVS can cause significant ill health, including painful disorders of the blood vessels, nerves and hands and finger joints. In severe cases, HAVS can lead to loss of hand movement and sufferers can experience severe pain if they get cold, making everyday tasks such as gardening or washing the car very difficult. Numbness and the inability to manipulate small objects can make getting dressed difficult too. Approximately two million workers are believed to be exposed to the effects of vibration, one million at a level which may harm them. By law, employers must assess and identify measures to eliminate or reduce risks from exposure so that employees’ health is not damaged.

**Unhygienic or non-existent welfare facilities**

You’d think in this day and age that all workers can expect a decent place to use the loo and wash up. But HSE inspectors have exposed some filthy and inadequate workplace bathrooms and kitchen areas, truly Dickensian conditions. Among other things, workers should normally have access to clean toilets, wash basins, running hot and cold washing water, drinking water and a means to heat food. Sometimes these facilities are needed to control workplace risks, such as working with lead, and a failure to provide them can lead to ill health that means not only the workers suffer, but also the business – through increased rates of sickness absence.

“He died because the companies responsible for his safety didn’t do their jobs properly.”

“Vehicle paint sprayers are about 80 times more likely to develop occupational asthma than the rest of the UK working population.”