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Top 10 Safety Tips for Heavy Equipment Operators

The number of reported injuries and fatalities involving heavy equipment is on the rise.

In an effort to decrease incidents involving the operation of heavy equipment, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) offers these tips:

1. Avoid Blind Spots:

It is crucial that heavy equipment operators know for certain that there is no one and nothing behind them before they back up. To avoid blind spots, the operator must sometimes physically get out of his machine and go to the back to look. Mirrors do not always provide a 360-degree breadth of vision. The short time it takes to hop off the machine and look may save a life.

2. Maintain Constant Communication:

It is vital that operators of heavy equipment maintain ongoing communication with each other, the ground crew, and their supervisors. Two-way radios are at present the best way to do this.

3. Wear Seat Belts:

In every vehicle, it is important to wear seat belts. This holds as true for heavy equipment as it does for cars and trucks. If the vehicle rolls, wearing a seat belt keeps the operator from being thrown from it. Seat belts save lives. Employers must provide appropriate seat belts in heavy equipment as part of the regulations for worker protective gear.

4. Use the Three-Point Rule for Mounting and Dismounting:

More than a handful of operators have been hurt or killed due to the careless mounting or dismounting of heavy equipment. Do not jump off or onto heavy equipment.

Maintain three-point contact: use two hands and one foot or two feet and one hand to mount or dismount safely.

5. Load and Unload Safely:

Before loading or unloading, make sure your heavy equipment is sitting on level ground. This reduces the chances of the vehicle rolling or sliding. Have someone act as a spotter to make sure people are standing away from your loading or unloading area.

6. Do a Pre-Work Check for Hazards:

Before beginning work on a site, conduct a visual check for overhead and underground dangers, such as cables, gas lines, and hydro wires. These should all be flagged for identification. Dig with a shovel when underground obstructions are close. Wherever holes are made, set up barriers to avoid workers or visitors to the work site inadvertently falling into them.

7. Avoid Unexpected Start-Up:

Before completing maintenance on heavy equipment where unexpected start-up might cause injury or death, the vehicle must be made inoperative by disconnecting the power source.

OSHA's lockout tagout guidelines require that specific practices and procedures be followed for shutting down equipment. These procedures separate the machine from its energy source thus preventing potential hazardous start-up during maintenance procedures. Employers may develop lockout tagout programs that best suit their workplace facilities.

8. Know and Obey Load Limits:

Know load limits for size and weight for the equipment set up. Make sure load is secured using the correct attachments. Do a visual check of rigging to inspect for fraying or breakage regularly. Before moving a load, make sure workers are safely out of the way.

9. Conduct a Daily Inspection:

Before using heavy equipment each day, do an inspection. Use a paper or computer checklist.

Walk around the equipment looking for cracked or split hoses, undercarriage irregularities, leaking fluids, and stress points. Check fluid levels and tire pressure. When the checklist has been completed, report any concerns to maintenance.

10. Recognize Your Physical and Emotional Limits: We all have different physical, mental, and emotional capabilities, and these change with age and experience. For your own safety, and the safety of your co-workers, never put yourself in a situation where you are doing a task that you feel physically, mentally, or emotionally incapable. Express your concerns. Be extra careful in stressful job situations. Ask for clearer instructions. Request a spotter. Request that a more experienced operator complete a specific part of the job.

It is important that you come to the job alert, calm, productive, and optimistic. Workers who are stressed, distracted, depressed, or angry frequently make poor judgement calls, which can lead to fatal incidents or injuries. If you need help, ask your supervisor.

Being part of a positive, productive work environment is critical to avoiding workplace incidents.

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