
Ladder Safety – Nick's story

Summary

Injuries associated with ladder falls have been steadily increasing in Australia, especially among men aged 60 years and older doing work in and around the home.

Nick's story



Five years ago Nick was an active man in his seventies, who looked after his household. He undertook home maintenance and DIY projects, and daily walked more than 10 kilometres from his Port Melbourne home to St Kilda beach and back. Nick and his wife, Mersina, travelled a lot, visiting their children and grandchildren in Asia and enjoying holidays around the world.

Nick had recently completed an extension to their home when a torrential downpour put the new roof to the test. Water started coming inside, so Nick went out to see if he could fix the leak.

There were two ladders resting against the wall where Nick needed to climb up. In his haste, he decided to climb the first ladder where it lay. He didn't stabilise the ladder. It was only a short climb to the gutter, about two metres, but halfway up Nick fell, landing on his back and hitting his head on the grass in his back yard. The ladder came down on top of him.

Mersina and Nick's son, John, were home at the time. John heard Nick fall and went outside to see what had happened.

"When I went outside, Dad was lying on his back on the grass," John said. "At first I thought he was dead, because he wasn't moving – he was unconscious."

John rushed inside to get Mersina and call an ambulance. By the time they came back out, Nick had regained consciousness and got up. He seemed to be ok, but John and Mersina took him to the hospital. He suffered a

seizure while in the emergency department.

Nick's outlook was not good. He had fractured his back and suffered spinal stenosis. Before the accident he had been on blood-thinning medication, which contributed to a a subdural brain haematoma.

"The doctor said he might not make it," John said. "He was in an induced coma in the ICU – it was pretty bad."

Nick was in the hospital for nearly six months. As well as the initial injuries, he suffered a number of setbacks while in hospital, including pneumonia, fibrosis of the lungs, a pulmonary embolism and muscle atrophy.

Now back at home, Mersina and John care for Nick and have taken over responsibility for the household. Their lives have changed significantly since Nick's fall.

"We used to do so many things," Mersina said. "We travelled all over the world; but now every day is the same."

"Dad is not the same person he used to be," John said. "He's constantly worrying about whether he will get better. The longer it takes, the more depressed he gets."

"Before the accident he was very active; he mowed the lawns, he did house maintenance. He was a very hands-on European migrant who did everything himself."

"He never thought anything would happen to him – certainly not in the way it turned out – so it could potentially happen to anyone."

Ladder safety tips

Make sure your ladder is safe and right for the job

- Use a Standards-approved ladder (Australian Standard AS/NZS 1892).
- Read the manufacturer's advice and follow safety warnings.
- Check that your ladder is in good working order (for example, ensure it is free of rust, has non-slip safety feet, and that safety locks and braces are in place).
- Make sure the ladder is rated for the weight you need it to carry – your weight, the weight of tools and supplies, and any objects placed on the ladder).
- Make sure that the ladder you choose is right for the task.

Work in the right conditions

- Work up a ladder in suitable weather conditions (for example, a hot day may cause you to get dizzy and lose balance, a wet day may cause you or the ladder to slip, high winds could cause the ladder to fall).
- Make sure your ladder is not placed in front of outward-opening doors or windows.

Take the time to set up your ladder safely

- Place the ladder on dry, firm and level ground.
- Always ensure the ladder is locked firmly into place before use.
- Make sure the ladder is the right height for the job.
- If you're working on an extension ladder, ensure it reaches about one metre above the surface it rests against and secure it at the top.

Work safely up the ladder

- Wear non-slip footwear.
- Work within your arm's reach and avoid leaning out – it is much safer to get down and readjust the ladder.
- Maintain three points of contact at all times while on the ladder. Use two hands when climbing. When using a tool, make sure both feet and your other hand are secure on the ladder.
- Only climb as far as the second step from the top of a step ladder or the third step/rung from the top of an extension ladder.

Know your limits

- Work within your limits and make sure another person is at home while you are working with a ladder, in case you need help.
- Have another person around to hold the ladder to prevent it from slipping.
- If you are affected by medication, have a medical condition that could affect your strength or balance, or if you just don't feel well, leave the task for another day or ask someone to help.
- If you are 65 years or older (or 50 years or older and of Aboriginal descent) and you need assistance with basic maintenance around your home, contact My Aged Care by calling 1800 200 422 or visiting **My Aged Care**.

Nick's story is also available in languages other than English.

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