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PERSPECTIVES

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): Hard Hats, Head Injuries & OSHA

Our perspectives feature the viewpoints of our subject matter experts on current topics and emerging trends.

INTRODUCTION

In 2021 the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported 68,170 head injuries with 15,730 of those injuries involving eyes. Protecting employees from potential head injuries is an important function of any safety plan or program. As this is the case, hard hats have become part of the daily "uniform" of those working at construction sites, industrial locations, manufacturing plants, and jobs sites in other industries as well.

If you have ever performed an inspection and hit your head on a beam without the protection of a hard hat, you will know the value of head protection!

HARD HATS

It is important to note that not all hard hats are the same. They can be rated for different hazards such as electrical, extreme temperatures, or lateral impact from falls when using fall protection equipment.

In the United States, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires that employers ensure that head protection is required when there are recognized hazards that may cause head injuries. Many other countries (Canada and the United Kingdom to name a couple) have similar regulatory requirements.

OSHA & Standards

Interestingly, OSHA does not "certify" any types of personal protective equipment (PPE); they rely on other organizations such as The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) or, in Canada, the Canadian Standards Association (CSA). Both organizations accredit performance and testing standards that equipment manufacturers must meet for equipment to be certified and rated for a particular use. These certifications and ratings provide employers guidance on what type of hard hat to purchase. Testing may include:

- Penetration resistance
- Impact force reduction
- Electrical resistance
- Shell flammability
- Temperature extremes

All hard hats meeting ANSI or CSA standards will have a permanent label inside the shell that will provide information containing the type and class of hard hat and its appropriate use.

The manufacturer's name along with the date of manufacture will also be present.

Additional features that may suit an employer are full brim for additional sun protection, slots for accessories such as lamps, high visibility markings, and ratchet suspension mechanisms for tighter fit.

Proper Hard Hat Care & Usage

Treat this life saving piece of equipment with the respect it deserves! Remember:

- Avoid excessive amounts of logo/project stickers and keep them at least ½ an inch from the helmet's edges. Never use permanent markers as the chemicals can weaken the protective shell.
- Never puncture or drill a hole into any part of a hard hat
- Never wear a hard hat backward or with a baseball cap underneath it.
- Keep the helmet and suspension clean using mild soap and warm water; never use abrasives or solvents.
- Keep hard hats out of direct sunlight such as the dashboard of a vehicle.
- Follow manufacturers' instructions on replacement; however, daily inspections are critical to determine signs of deterioration or cracks.
- Replace parts accordingly. The interior suspension is most likely to be the first part that needs replacing with some manufacturers suggesting suspension replacement every 12 months if worn daily. Shell replacement may range from two to five years.
- Immediately replace any hard hat that has sustained an impact or has been dropped from a height.

Even with care and attention a helmet will not remain an effective part of one's PPE forever. Harsh conditions, as well as continuous (versus occasional) use will play a part in determining the life span of this equipment.

CONCLUSION

Discuss your specific needs with your Supervisor or The Safety Department. Wear your hard hat with pride and set a professional example to others on any site that you visit.

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MORE ABOUT J.S. HELD'S CONTRIBUTOR

Tom Sumner is Director of Health and Safety for J.S. Held Global Operations. He has over 30 years of technical/safety experience in a wide range of Environmental Health and Safety projects. Tom is experienced in the design and implementation of health and safety programs, accident investigations and safety audits for general and marine industries, as well as extensive experience in industrial hygiene, air quality/mold, health & safety training, and litigation support in environmental health and safety cases.

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