Working on Fragile Roofs Meeting Kit



WHAT’S AT STAKE

Working on fragile roofs presents a unique and often underestimated danger. Unlike typical roofs, fragile roofs can’t reliably support a person’s weight. This means a single misstep can lead to a catastrophic fall. We’re not just talking about minor injuries; we’re talking about potentially fatal falls through the roof itself. Recognizing these hazards and taking the necessary precautions is critical for anyone working on or near these types of structures.

WHAT’S THE DANGER

Fragile roofs are deceptive. They may appear solid but can easily break under pressure. Here are some of the key dangers:

- **Sudden Collapse:** The primary danger is the risk of the roof suddenly collapsing under a person’s weight. This can happen without warning, leaving little to no time to react.
- **Hidden Weak Points:** Fragile roofs often have hidden weak points that are not readily visible. These can include areas weakened by age, weather damage, or previous repairs.
- **Environmental Factors:** Weather conditions like rain, snow, or ice can further weaken fragile roofs and make them even more dangerous to work on.
- **Difficulty Identifying Fragile Materials:** It can be difficult to identify fragile roofing materials, especially from the ground. Some materials may look similar to more robust roofing types.

Common fragile roofing materials include asbestos cement sheets, fibre cement sheets, glass (including wired glass), rotten wood, old metal sheeting that is corroded or rusted, and skylights and roof lights. It’s important to remember that even if skylights and roof lights have covers, these covers themselves may also be fragile and unable to support a person’s weight.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Working safely on fragile roofs requires a multi-layered approach. It’s not enough to just use one safety measure; you need a combination of controls to minimize the risk.

Risk Assessment:

Before any work begins, a thorough risk assessment must be conducted by a competent person. This isn't just a glance; it's a careful evaluation of all potential hazards. The assessment should identify:

- **Type of Fragile Material:** Precisely identify the material. Different materials have different strengths and weaknesses.
- **Roof Condition:** Assess the roof for any signs of deterioration, such as cracks, corrosion, or previous repairs.
- **Environmental Factors:** Consider weather conditions like rain, snow, or wind, which can significantly impact the stability of a fragile roof.
- **Access and Egress:** Plan safe access and egress routes to and from the work area. These routes should avoid fragile areas as much as possible.

Avoid Working on Fragile Roofs if Possible:

The best way to eliminate the risk posed by fragile roofs is, quite simply, to avoid working directly on them whenever possible. This means carefully considering alternative methods for accessing the work area and completing the necessary tasks without putting weight directly on the fragile surface. One effective approach is the use of Mobile Elevating Work Platforms (MEWPs). These platforms, such as boom lifts or scissor lifts, allow workers to access areas above or alongside the roof without ever stepping onto the fragile surface. This eliminates the risk of a fall through the roof.

Another option is to erect scaffolding from the ground. Properly constructed scaffolding provides a stable and secure work platform that is entirely independent of the roof structure. This method is particularly useful for tasks that require workers to remain in one area for an extended period. When possible, consider using long-reach tools. Tools with extended handles or specialized attachments can allow workers to perform certain tasks from a safe distance.

Safety Netting or Fall Arrest Systems:

When working on fragile roofs, safety netting or personal fall arrest systems (harnesses, lanyards, and secure anchor points) should be used as a secondary means of fall protection. These systems should be installed and used according to manufacturer's instructions and relevant safety standards.

Warning Signs and Barriers:

Clearly mark fragile roof areas with highly visible warning signs and barriers to prevent accidental access. This is crucial for areas that are not immediately obvious as fragile, such as roof lights or areas covered in debris.

Training and Supervision:

All workers involved in working on or near fragile roofs must receive appropriate training on the hazards, safe work practices, and the proper use of safety equipment. Close supervision is also essential to ensure that safe work practices are followed.

Weather Conditions:

Avoid working on fragile roofs during adverse weather conditions such as rain, snow, ice, or high winds, as these conditions can significantly increase the risk of accidents.

FINAL WORD

Fragile roofs demand respect. Let’s make sure we’re all taking the necessary steps to stay safe and prevent falls.