

Ladder Safety – One Step at a Time

Ladders are used in almost every veterinary practice. Although they are uncomplicated devices, ladder misuse and using faulty ladders can cause falls resulting in serious injury or death. Ladder-related incidents led to more than 150 worker fatalities and more than 20,000 nonfatal injuries in 2015, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Recent accident statistics indicate that falls account for almost 13 percent of workplace deaths, and over 16 percent of workplace injuries.

Ladders come in many sizes and are constructed of materials to meet a variety of applications. No matter what kind of ladder you have—step, straight, or extension—first assess the work to be performed to determine the correct ladder for the job.

Ladder Selection Guidelines

Choose a ladder that can support the combined weight of the user and material. Ladders are typically constructed of wood, metal, or fiberglass. They have duty ratings indicating how much weight they can support. Never exceed the duty rating weight capacity.

Make sure you can safely reach the work to be performed when standing on the ladder. Consider the environment the ladder will be used in (i.e., wet/dry/ice, inside/outside, traffic areas, lighting, weather). When working around open electric circuits, avoid electrical shock hazards by using fiberglass or wood ladders.

Using a Ladder Safely

- Always inspect a ladder before using it. Check wood ladders for cracks or splits. Inspect metal and fiberglass ladders for bends or breaks. Periodically inspect all ladders used in the practice. Tag and remove damaged ladders from use until they are repaired. Never use a damaged ladder.
- Assess whether the floor or ground is level for positioning the ladder.
- When transporting a ladder, plan your route. Carry the ladder horizontally and hold the side rail at the ladder's midpoint to balance the load. If the ladder is too large to handle, get help moving it. When setting up a ladder, make sure it is straight and resting

firmly on the floor or ground. When using a straight or extension ladder, make sure it is placed at a safe angle, with the base away from the wall or edge of the upper level about one foot for every four feet of vertical height, and top is secure to prevent it from sliding sideways.

- Overreaching is a common cause of falls from ladders. Keep your belly button between the side rails of the ladder and do not try to move a ladder when you are on it.
 - Do not climb higher than the third step from the top on straight and extension ladders, and do not climb more than the second tread from the top of stepladders.
 - When climbing up or coming down a ladder, always face the ladder and use both hands to keep a grip. Never carry heavy or bulky loads up or down the ladder.
- When you have finished the job, store the ladder so it is not exposed to excessive heat or dampness to ensure it is in good condition for the next use.

Ladders are useful in many situations and require caution when working with them. Save yourself time, trouble, and possible injury. Take a minute and use ladders correctly. Understanding the hazards and using ladders safely can prevent falls. ■

