



Hard hats: Know the facts

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A construction worker removes his hard hat because he is too warm. An engineer refuses to wear head protection, as she has “never been hurt before.” A utility worker thinks hard hats make him look silly and removes his every chance he gets.

All of these situations are dangerous. Head injuries can result in traumatic brain injuries and death. In 2012, more than 65,000 cases involving days away from work occurred due to head injuries in the workplace, according to the 2015 edition of the National Safety Council chartbook “Injury Facts.” That same year, 1,020 workers died from head injuries sustained on the job.

Employers must ensure their workers wear head protection if they are at risk of being struck by falling objects, bumping their heads on fixed objects or coming in contact with electrical hazards.

OSHA states that hard hats should:

Resist penetration by objects

Absorb the shock from a blow to the head by an object

Be slow to burn

Be water-resistant

All hard hats also should have a label inside the shell listing the manufacturer, ANSI designation and class of the hat.

OSHA states that hard hats must feature a hard outer shell and a lining that absorbs shock and incorporates a headband. Straps should suspend from the shell about 1 inch to 1¼ inches away from the worker's head. Ensure hard hats meet ANSI standard requirements and that employees are wearing the proper type for their job task. The three industrial classes of hard hats, according to OSHA, are:

Class G - General Helmet:

These hard hats provide protection against impact and object penetration. Their voltage protection is limited to 2,200 volts.

Class E - Electrical Helmet:

Class E hard hats deliver the most protection against electrical hazards (up to 20,000 volts). Additionally, they protect against impact and penetration hazards from falling objects or objects flying through the air.

Class C - Conductive Helmet:

For lightweight impact protection and more comfort, Class C hard hats are the way to go. However, OSHA points out that these offer no protection against electrical hazards.

Another type of head protection, known as a “bump cap,” is intended for workers in areas that have low head clearance. However, OSHA states that bump caps “are not designed to protect against falling or flying objects and are not ANSI-approved.”

OSHA offers a number of tips for caring for hard hats, including:

Clean and inspect hard hats daily. Hard hats with cracks, perforations or other deformities should be removed from service immediately.

Know that paints, paint thinners and certain types of cleaning agents can weaken a hard hat's shell, as well as reduce its electrical resistance. Consult the hard hat's manufacturer if you are unsure what products you can use.

Do not apply labels or insert holes into a hard hat – doing so can damage the its protective capabilities.

Refrain from leaving protective headgear in direct sunlight, as sunlight and extreme heat can damage them.