Toolbox talk

Roof work and fragile surfaces

Treat every roof as fragile until proved otherwise

10 minutes

For: Roofers, maintenance workers and anyone who may go on or near a roof

Why it matters

Roof work and fragile surfaces can cause fatal falls. HSE highlights rooflights and fibre-cement sheets, and warns that short maintenance and cleaning jobs also need full precautions.

Key points

1. Treat every roof as fragile until a competent person confirms it's safe.
2. Fragile surfaces include rooflights, fibre-cement sheets, liner panels, corroded metal sheets and glass.
3. Rooflights can be hard to spot, especially when painted over or dirty.
4. First choice is to stay off the roof, for example by working from a MEWP below.
5. If you must go on, use stagings, guardrails or nets close beneath the roof.
6. Fit edge protection at eaves and round flat roofs, with a double guardrail and toe board.
7. Precautions apply however short the job. Small maintenance and cleaning jobs are over-represented in accidents.
8. Look for fragile roof warning signs, but never assume a roof is safe because there isn't one.

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Go further: HSE guide: Health and safety in roof work (HSG33)

Sources: HSE: Fragile surfaces; HSE: Roof work; HSE: Health and safety in roof work (HSG33).

This talk supports, but does not replace, your site-specific risk assessment, method statement, training and supervision. Free to copy and use. **tradefoxapp.com/toolbox-talks/fragile-roofs**

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Do

- Ask whether the roof has been checked by a competent person before going on.
- Use the planned safe access, such as a scaffold, tower or MEWP.
- Cover or guard rooflights you need to work near.
- Treat painted-over or dirty rooflights as fragile, even if you can't see them clearly.
- Stop and ask if you're unsure whether a surface is fragile.

Don't

- Don't walk on fibre-cement sheets or rooflights.
- Don't go on a roof without edge protection or a safe system of work.
- Don't skip precautions because the job will only take a few minutes.
- Don't assume a roof is safe because there's no warning sign.

Ask the group

- Which roofs on this job could be fragile?
- Could any of our roof work be done from below instead?
- Where are the rooflights, and how are they protected?
- How would we rescue someone who fell into a safety net?

If it goes wrong: If someone falls through a roof, call 999 and get a first aider. Don't go onto the roof to reach them, as it may be fragile too. Keep everyone off the roof, tell your supervisor and don't move the person unless they're in danger.

On this site

Nearest first aider _____

Emergency assembly point _____

Site-specific hazards and controls _____

_____

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Attendance register

Roof work and fragile surfaces

Site / project _____ Date and time _____

Presented by _____ Company _____

	Name (print)	Company	Signature
1			
2			
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By signing, attendees confirm they took part in this toolbox talk and understood the key points. Keep this record with your site safety file.

Presenter signature _____ Follow-up actions _____

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Quick check

Roof work and fragile surfaces

Tick one answer for each question. Your presenter has the answers.

Name _____ Date _____

1. How should you treat a roof until it's been checked?

- [ ] As safe if it looks solid
- [ ] As fragile
- [ ] As safe if it has no signs

2. Which of these is a fragile surface?

- [ ] A fibre-cement sheet
- [ ] A scaffold board
- [ ] A concrete floor

3. What's the first choice for work on a fragile roof?

- [ ] Walk carefully
- [ ] Avoid going on it, for example work from below
- [ ] Use a plank

4. Do precautions apply to a 5-minute job?

- [ ] No, it's too quick
- [ ] Yes, however short the job
- [ ] Only if it's raining

5. What edge protection is needed on a flat roof?

- [ ] A rope
- [ ] A double guardrail and toe board
- [ ] Nothing if you're careful

For the presenter

Answers and sources

Quick check answers

1. As fragile

HSE says treat all roofs as fragile until a competent person confirms otherwise.

2. A fibre-cement sheet

Fibre-cement sheets and rooflights are the main causes of falls through fragile roofs.

3. Avoid going on it, for example work from below

HSE says avoid going on fragile surfaces where possible, such as working from a MEWP below.

4. Yes, however short the job

HSE says precautions are needed no matter how short the job. Short maintenance and cleaning jobs are over-represented in injury statistics.

5. A double guardrail and toe board

HSE says flat roofs need a secure double guardrail and toe board round the edge.

Sources

- HSE: Fragile surfaces
  https://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/safetytopics/fragile.htm
- HSE: Roof work
  https://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/safetytopics/roofwork.htm
- HSE: Health and safety in roof work (HSG33)
  https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg33.htm

> **Presenting tips:** keep it to about 10 minutes, use real examples from your site, ask the group questions rather than reading everything out, and record attendance on the register.

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Every roof is fragile until proved otherwise.

1. **Never walk on rooflights or sheets**
2. **Stay off if it can be avoided**
3. **Edge protection every time**

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Sources and qualifications

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Scope: Great Britain safety legislation unless a nation is identified. Northern Ireland has separate legislation. Site rules can be stricter than minimum legal duties; use the site assessment, instructions and competent supervision.

A4 applicability: no installation-design requirement is asserted in this talk. Its claims are referenced to the subject-specific sources below.

S1. HSE: Fragile surfaces

Assume fragile until confirmed otherwise, material examples, avoidance, collective protection and short-job risk; key points and quiz.

https://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/safetytopics/fragile.htm

S2. HSE: Roof work

Edge protection, access and work planning; Do/Don't and poster.

https://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/safetytopics/roofwork.htm

S3. HSE HSG33: Health and safety in roof work

Detailed fragile-surface controls, fall protection and rescue planning.

https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg33.htm