

Ladder safety matters

Mick's story

Injuries associated with ladder falls have been steadily increasing in Australia, especially among men aged 60 years and older doing work in and around the home.

This story is about Mick, an active retiree who fell from a DIY structure he had set up in order to trim a hedge.

In January 2015, Mick decided to trim the tall hedge that his wife, Barb, had been asking him to do for a while. It was a hot, humid day, and Mick was tired, but he just wanted to get the job done.

Mick was an active retiree in his sixties, who liked to do things himself. He had run a restumping business for 20 years, so he was used to physical labour and had broken a few bones in his time.

The hedge was more than three metres high, so Mick set up a couple of ladders with a plank between them so that he could move along the hedge without going up and down a ladder. He put a few bits of wood under the feet of the ladders to stabilise them. Mick was leaning his back against the side of the house, electric hedge trimmer in hand, when the ladders gave way underneath him.

Mick fell more than two metres to the ground, hitting his head on a brick windowsill on the way down.

Barb heard his fall from the back garden.

Mick's first thought was that he could have broken his neck. He lay on the ground and tried moving his fingers and toes, thankful when he could. Barb took him to their local GP, who advised to take Mick to hospital.

When they got there, the doctor told Mick 'You don't know how lucky you are'.

He had broken four ribs, broken his C6 vertebrae and fractured five other vertebrae. His head had swollen 'like a bowling ball' from the knock.

Mick spent more than two months at home in a neck brace, confined to bed.



"It still plays out in my head: what if...?" Mick said. "I was lying in bed for eight or ten weeks and it drove me crazy – so what if I'd been bedridden or confined to a wheelchair for the rest of my life?"

Mick says he still tries to help around the house, but he can't do the things he used to do. He has trouble lifting – even helping with the groceries – and he struggles to mow the lawns. He can't sit for long periods of time and has trouble sleeping because of the pain he suffers daily, more than a year after the accident.

Mick has changed his behaviour when it comes to working at height. He bought a new ladder with a platform and safety rails, but he's still not keen to climb it. His son-in-law comes to help with tasks around the home, and friends have also offered to help out.

"It's enough to make you feel depressed, because I can't do anything," Mick said. "I've had my teary moments, wondering what's the use of being around if I can't do anything?"

"That's really hard for men who have done their own work all of their lives. It's so hard to let go and pay for someone to do it or ask for help."

"But I would say to anyone of 50 years or older: think twice about going up the ladder."

Ladder safety matters

Visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/laddersafety for more information about the Ladder safety matters campaign.

Ladder safety tips

Make sure your ladder is safe and right for the job

- Use a Standards-approved ladder (Australian Standard AS/NZS 1892)
- Read the manufacturer's advice and follow safety warnings
- Check that your ladder is in good working order (e.g. ensure it is free of rust, has non-slip safety feet, and that safety locks and braces are in place)
- Make sure the ladder is rated for the weight you need it to carry (e.g. your weight, the weight of tools and supplies, and any objects placed on the ladder)
- Make sure that the ladder you choose is right for the task

Work in the right conditions

- Work up a ladder in suitable weather conditions (e.g. a hot day may cause you to get dizzy and lose balance, a wet day may cause you or the ladder to slip, high winds could cause the ladder to fall)
- Make sure your ladder is not placed in front of outward-opening doors or windows

Take the time to set up your ladder safely

- Place the ladder on dry, firm and level ground
- Always ensure the ladder is locked firmly into place before use
- Make sure the ladder is the right height for the job
- If you're working on an extension ladder, ensure it reaches about a metre above the surface it rests against and secure it at the top

Work safely up the ladder

- Wear non-slip footwear
- Work within your arm's reach and avoid leaning out – it is much safer to get down and readjust the ladder
- Maintain three points of contact at all times while on the ladder. Use two hands when climbing. When using a tool, make sure both feet and your other hand are secure on the ladder
- Only climb as far as the second step from the top of a step ladder or the third step/rung from the top of an extension ladder

Know your limits

- Work within your limits and make sure another person is at home while you are working with a ladder, in case you need help
- Have another person around to hold the ladder to prevent it from slipping
- If you are affected by medication, have a medical condition that could affect your strength or balance, or if you just don't feel well, leave the task for another day or ask someone to help
- If you are 65 years or older (or 50 years or older and of Aboriginal descent) and you need assistance with basic maintenance around your home, contact My Aged Care by calling 1800 200 422 or visiting www.myagedcare.gov.au

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