

TOOLBOX TALK #28

PROTECTING WORKERS FROM LIGHTNING



The odds of being struck and killed by lightning in your lifetime are around 1 in 139,000. That means you're about 10 times more likely to die from radiation or extreme temperatures than be killed by a lightning strike.

The National Lightning Safety Council reports that 11 people were killed in 2021 – the fewest recorded by the organization since it began tracking the statistic in 2006. For reference, the National Weather Service places the annual average from 1998 to 2018 at 43.

Three deaths reported in 2021 occurred on the job: a 60-year-old construction employee in Wisconsin, a 19-year-old roofer in Florida and a 19-year-old lifeguard in New Jersey.

Although fatalities are rare, the danger is that lightning can strike with little or no warning. That's why it can't be ignored or taken lightly by employees or workers – particularly those who spend time outdoors. Outdoor workers should practice extra caution during spring and summer. An occupation with one of the highest risks of lightning strikes is construction.

Seeking shelter is the preferred action to avoid being struck by lightning. NOAA recommends doing so in a fully enclosed building with electrical wiring and plumbing, which can conduct electricity more effectively than your body. If a building isn't an option, a hard-topped metal vehicle with its windows rolled up can be a suitable shelter.

Don't leave any shelter until 30 minutes after hearing the last sound of thunder. Lightning is most likely to strike the tallest object in an area, so try not to be the tallest object. However, lying on the ground isn't recommended. Lying flat increases your chance of being affected by potentially deadly ground current.

Workers should stay away from water, utility poles, hilltops, cellphone towers or large equipment. Instead, retreat to a low-lying area – a valley, a ditch or an area dense with smaller trees – if shelter isn't available.

These precautions can help avoid potential serious injuries and death.