

Lightning Safety When Working Outdoors

Lightning strikes can severely injure or kill workers whose jobs involve working outdoors. Lightning is often overlooked as an occupational hazard, but employers need awareness about lightning hazards to ensure their workers' safety. This fact sheet provides employers and workers at outdoor worksites with lightning safety recommendations from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Introduction

Lightning is a dangerous natural force. Annually in the United States, cloud-to-ground lightning occurs 20 to 25 million times and over 300 people are struck by lightning. During the past 30 years, about 50 people, on average, have been killed by lightning strikes every year, and many more suffer permanent disabilities.

Precautions should be taken to prevent worker exposure to lightning. Employers should recognize lightning as an occupational hazard. Supervisors and workers at outdoor worksites should take lightning safety seriously.

Workers whose jobs involve working outdoors in open spaces, on or near tall objects, or near explosives or conductive materials (e.g., metal) have significant exposure to lightning risks. Worker activities at higher risk for lightning hazards include:

- Logging
- Explosives handling or storage
- Heavy equipment operation
- Roofing
- Construction (e.g., scaffolding)
- Building maintenance
- Power utility field repair
- Steel erection/telecommunications
- Farming and field labor
- Plumbing and pipe fitting
- Lawn services/landscaping
- Airport ground personnel operations
- Pool and beach lifeguarding



Photo: NOAA

Figure 1: Lightning strikes tall tree.

Reducing Lightning Hazards When Working Outdoors

Employers, supervisors, and workers should understand lightning risks, characteristics, and precautions to minimize workplace hazards. Lightning is unpredictable and can strike outside the heaviest rainfall areas or even up to 10 miles from any rainfall.

Many lightning victims are caught outside during a storm because they did not act promptly to get to a safe place, **or they go back outside too soon after a storm has passed**. If signs of approaching thunderstorms occur, workers should not begin any task they cannot quickly stop. Proper planning and safe practices can easily increase lightning safety when working outdoors.

When thunder roars, go indoors!

If you hear thunder, even a distant rumble, get to a safe place immediately.

Thunderstorms always include lightning. Any thunder you hear is caused by lightning!

NOAA advises that nowhere outside is safe when thunderstorms are in your area.

OSHA and NOAA recommend that employers and supervisors follow these lightning safety best practices for workers whose jobs involve working outdoors:

Check NOAA Weather Reports: Prior to beginning any outdoor work, employers and supervisors should check NOAA weather reports (weather.gov) and radio forecasts for all weather hazards. OSHA recommends that employers consider rescheduling jobs to avoid workers being caught outside in hazardous weather conditions. When working outdoors, supervisors and workers should continuously monitor weather conditions. Watch for darkening clouds and increasing wind speeds, which can indicate developing thunderstorms. Pay close attention to local television, radio, and Internet weather reports, forecasts, and emergency notifications regarding thunderstorm activity and severe weather.



Figure 2: Lightning strikes a communications tower.

Photo: NOAA

Seek Shelter in Buildings: Employers and supervisors should know and tell workers which buildings to go to after hearing thunder or seeing lightning. NOAA recommends seeking out fully enclosed buildings with electrical wiring and plumbing. Remain in the shelter for at least **30 minutes** after hearing the last sound of thunder.

Vehicles as Shelter: If safe building structures are not accessible, employers should guide workers to hard-topped metal vehicles with rolled up windows. Remain in the vehicle for at least **30 minutes** after hearing the last sound of thunder.

Phone Safety: After hearing thunder, do not use corded phones, except in an emergency. Cell phones and cordless phones may be used safely.

Emergency Action Plan

Employers should have a written Emergency Action Plan (EAP), as outlined in 29 CFR 1910.38 or [29 CFR 1926.35](#). The EAP should include a written lightning safety protocol for outdoor workers. This lightning safety protocol should:

- Inform supervisors and workers to take action after hearing thunder, seeing lightning, or perceiving any other warning signs of approaching thunderstorms.
- Indicate how workers are notified about lightning safety warnings.
- Identify locations and requirements for safe shelters.
- Indicate response times necessary for all workers to reach safe shelters.
- Specify approaches for determining when to suspend outdoor work activities, and when to resume outdoor work activities.
- Account for the time required to evacuate customers and members of the public, and the time needed for workers to reach safety.

Employers should also post information about lightning safety at outdoor worksites. All employees should be trained on how to follow the EAP, including the lightning safety procedures.



Figure 3: Cranes are especially vulnerable to lightning.

Photo: NOAA

What is lightning?

Lightning is a giant spark of electricity in the atmosphere between clouds or between a cloud and the ground.

Lightning can occur:

- Between the cloud and the ground (cloud-to-ground lightning)
- Within and between thunderstorm clouds (intra- and inter-cloud lightning)

For more information, see:

www.nssl.noaa.gov/education/svrwx101/lightning/faq

Lightning Safety Training

Employers should adequately train all workers on lightning safety. Training should be provided for each outdoor worksite, so that supervisors and workers know in advance where a worksite's safe shelters are and the time it takes to reach them. Employers should train supervisors and workers to provide lightning safety warnings in sufficient time for everyone to reach a worksite's safe shelters and take other appropriate precautions.

Lightning Warning Systems

An employer's EAP may include lightning warning or detection systems, which can provide advance warning of lightning hazards. However, no systems can detect the "first strike," detect all lightning, or predict lightning strikes. NOAA recommends that employers first rely on NOAA weather reports, including NOAA Weather Radio All Hazards: www.nws.noaa.gov/nwr.



Figure 4: Preparedness reduces lightning risks.

(For NOAA toolkits for organizations and large venues see: www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov/toolkits.shtml)

Commercial lightning detection and notification services are available to monitor for lightning activity. These notification services can send alerts when lightning activity develops or moves to within a certain range of a work site. In addition, these commercial systems can provide mapped locations of lightning strikes from an approaching storm. However, these systems cannot predict the first lightning strike. Consequently, it is important to watch the sky for storms developing overhead or nearby and get to a safe place prior to the first lightning strike.

Portable and hand-held lightning detectors function by detecting the electromagnetic signal from a nearby lightning strike and then processing the signal to estimate the distance to the lightning strike. These devices typically do not detect all strikes, cannot predict the first strike, cannot provide the location of a strike, and are less accurate than the commercial detection and notification systems. In some cases, simply listening for thunder or watching the sky may be a better indication of a developing or nearby storm.

For situations which require advance notice of thunderstorms, NOAA recommends monitoring forecasts and radar observations from either commercial weather services or NOAA to stay informed of changing weather conditions.

If Caught Outside in a Thunderstorm

If you find yourself caught outside during a thunderstorm, there may be nothing you can do to prevent being struck by lightning. There simply is no safe place outside in a thunderstorm. This is why it is very important to get to a safe place at the first signs of a thunderstorm. If you are caught outside follow NOAA's recommendations to decrease the risk of being struck.

- Lightning is likely to strike the tallest objects in a given area—you should not be the tallest object.
- Avoid isolated tall trees, hilltops, utility poles, cell phone towers, cranes, large equipment, ladders, scaffolding, or rooftops.
- Avoid open areas, such as fields. Never lie flat on the ground.
- Retreat to dense areas of smaller trees that are surrounded by larger trees, or retreat to low-lying areas (e.g., valleys, ditches) but watch for flooding.
- Avoid water, and immediately get out of and away from bodies of water (e.g., pools, lakes).

Photo: NOAA

Water does not attract lightning, but it is an excellent conductor of electricity. For boating safety see [NOAA PA 200252](#).

- Avoid wiring, plumbing, and fencing. Lightning can travel long distances through metal, which is an excellent conductor of electricity. Stay away from all metal objects, equipment, and surfaces that can conduct electricity.
- Do not shelter in sheds, pavilions, tents, or covered porches as they do not provide adequate protection from lightning.
- Seek fully-enclosed, substantial buildings with wiring and plumbing. In modern buildings, the *interior* wiring and plumbing will act as an earth ground. A building is a safe shelter as long as you are not in contact with anything that can conduct electricity (e.g., electrical equipment or cords, plumbing fixtures, corded phones). Do not lean against concrete walls or floors (which may have metal bars inside).

OSHA Standards

Under the General Duty Clause, [Section 5\(a\)\(1\)](#) of the *Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970* (OSH Act), employers are required to provide their employees with a place of employment that “is free from recognizable hazards that are causing or likely to cause death or serious harm to employees.” The courts have interpreted OSHA’s general duty clause to mean that an employer has a legal obligation to provide a workplace free of conditions or activities that either the employer or industry recognizes as hazardous and that cause, or are likely to cause, death or serious physical harm to employees when there is a feasible method to abate the hazard. This includes lightning hazards that can cause death or serious bodily harm.

During storms or high winds, OSHA prohibits:

- work on or from scaffolds ([29 CFR 1926.451\(f\)\(12\)](#));
- crane hoists ([29 CFR 1926.1431\(k\)\(8\)](#)); and
- work on top of walls ([29 CFR 1926.854\(c\)](#)).

In these situations, scaffold work may continue only if a qualified person determines it is safe and personal fall protection or wind screens are provided. Crane hoists may continue only if a qualified person determines it is safe.

Helpful Resources

- NOAA Lightning Safety on the Job, www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov/job.shtml
- National Fire Protection Association (NFPA):
- *NFPA 780: Standard for the Installation of Lightning Protection Systems*, 2014 Edition, www.nfpa.org/codes-and-standards/document-information-pages?mode=code&code=780
- National Lightning Safety Institute, lightningsafety.com
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Global Hydrology Resource Center, Lightning and Atmospheric Electricity Research, thunder.msfc.nasa.gov
- Transportation Research Board of the National Academies, *Protecting Airport Personnel from Lightning Strikes*, onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/acrp/acrp_iop_004.pdf

Contact NOAA

For information on lightning safety, or to obtain data, educational and outreach materials, and posters, visit NOAA’s lightning safety website: www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov or the WRN program at noaa.gov/wrn. Contact NOAA at wrn.feedback@noaa.gov. Examples of data available from NOAA are provided below.

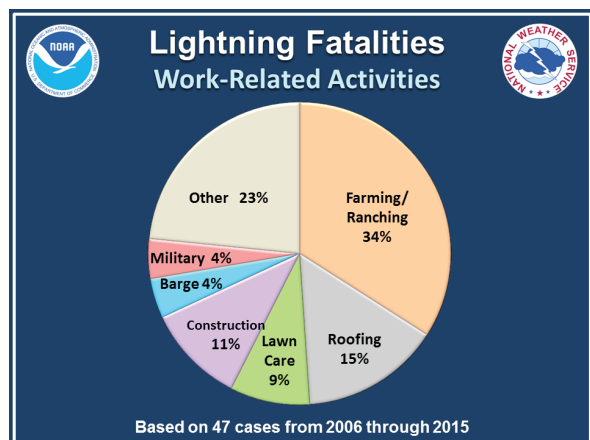


Figure 5: Work-related lightning fatalities

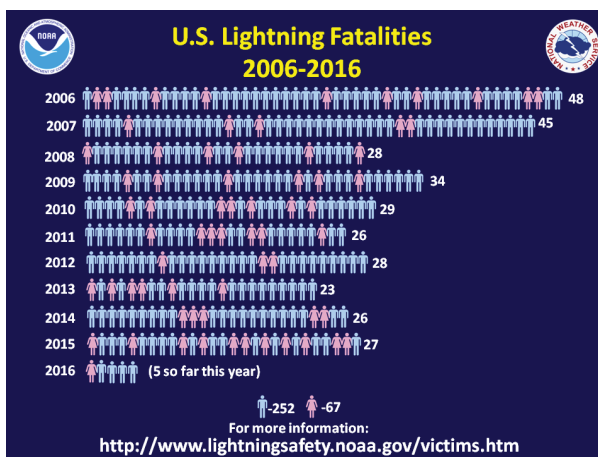


Figure 6: Annual lightning fatalities

Contact OSHA

For more information, to report an emergency, fatality, inpatient hospitalization, amputation, or loss of an eye, or to file a confidential complaint, or to request OSHA's free On-site Consultation Program services for small and medium-sized businesses, contact your nearest OSHA office, visit www.osha.gov, or call OSHA at 1-800-321-OSHA (6742), TTY 1-877-889-5627.

Workers' Rights

Workers have the right to:

- Working conditions that do not pose a risk of serious harm.
- Receive information and training (in a language and vocabulary the worker understands) about workplace hazards,

methods to prevent them, and the OSHA standards that apply to their workplace.

- Review records of work-related injuries and illnesses.
- File a complaint asking OSHA to inspect their workplace if they believe there is a serious hazard or that their employer is not following OSHA's rules. OSHA will keep all identities confidential.
- Exercise their rights under the law without retaliation, including reporting an injury or raising health and safety concerns with their employer or OSHA. If a worker has been retaliated against for using their rights, they must file a complaint with OSHA as soon as possible, but no later than 30 days.

For more information, see [OSHA's Workers page](#).



U.S. Department of Labor

