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## Use Your Head — Wear a Hard Hat



by **Debbie L. Feldman**

**I**n 1996, employees suffered from 58,000 workplace head injuries, causing them to miss days from work, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The employees could have prevented many of these injuries if they had been wearing protective head gear.

Protective head gear can lessen your chances of head injuries from falling tools and construction debris, or from hitting your head against something hard, such as an overhead beam. It can also protect you from an electric shock or burn if you come in contact with an electric conductor.

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### **If the helmet fits, wear it**

Head protection gear, also known as hard hats or helmets, is worn by many workers including transportation department workers, mining operators, utility workers, rail-

***Your hard hat can give you years of use. If you take care of it and wear it properly, it will protect you.***

road crews, construction workers, agriculture laborers, warehouse employees, oil industry personnel, heavy equipment operators, and those who work around electrical wires and conductors.

But head protective gear can't make your job safer if you don't wear it. "All of our employees are required to wear head protection gear while working on projects," says Chris S. Forbes, manager of training and program development for Environmental, Safety and Health Services at Bechtel Corporation, a heavy construction company in Gaithersburg, Md. "As a new employee, you're assigned a helmet."

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Hard hats are classified as class A, B or C, according to the hazards they can protect you against. Class A helmets reduce the impact of falling objects and the danger of contact with exposed low-voltage conductors. Class B helmets reduce the impact of falling objects and the danger of contact with exposed high-voltage conductors. Class C helmets reduce the impact of falling objects, but don't protect you against electric conductors.

There are two styles of hard hats. In the full-brim style, the brim completely circles the helmet. In the peak-style, an extra brim extends over the eye area. There are also two types of suspensions: standard and ratchet. To adjust a standard suspension, remove your hat and tighten the suspension as you tighten a belt. A ratchet suspension has a black knob on the back, and you can adjust it while you're wearing the hat.

Be sure your helmet fits right. There should be one inch between the suspension and the shell so that air can circulate. Adjust the suspension to make sure it's not too loose or too tight. If the suspension is too loose, the hat might fall off. If it's too tight, it may give you a headache.

If you're wearing a hat that has a peak on the brim, always wear the peak to the front and centered on your head. Never wear a hat tilted

back on your head. In order to properly protect your nose and head, you must wear your helmet centered on your head.

### **Take care of your helmet so it can take care of you**

Hard hats have two parts designed to work together: the shell and the suspension. The outer shell deflects blows and distributes the impact over a wide area, helping to lessen the force of the blow. Be sure to inspect your

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helmet shell weekly for dents, cracks, nicks and gouges or any other type of damage. If your hat shows signs of damage, replace it as soon as possible.

The suspension helps absorb the shock from a blow and keeps the shell away from your skull. Over time, the suspension can

become worn or damaged. Check often for cracks, frayed or cut straps, a torn headband or other signs of wear. Wear and damage can be caused by perspiration, hair oils, or normal wear and tear. Replace a damaged suspension immediately.

Some things can weaken the helmet's shell and prevent it from protecting you. Don't drill holes in the shell for ventilation. Also don't drop, throw or sit on your hat. Since sunlight and heat can rot the harness and straps, don't leave your helmet in the sun.

Paint can damage the shell and also cover up imperfections, making it harder to inspect. Stickers or tape can also cover up damage, so avoid putting them on your hat.

Clean your helmet at least once a month to remove sweat, oil and grease. Jennifer Marsh, market manager for Occupational Safety at the E.D. Bullard Company in Cynthiana, Ky., suggests soaking and scrubbing the shell and suspension with a mild detergent to remove dirt and stains. Never use solvents, as they can damage the plastic shell. Make sure the water is at least 140 degrees F. Rinse with clean, warm water. Wipe it; let it air dry; then inspect it for damage.

Your hard hat can give you years of use. If you take care of it and wear it properly, it will protect you. □