

Don't Cut Corners When it Comes to Excavating Safety

Trench accidents can happen when proper safety precautions aren't taken, regardless of the crew's experience

This site shows an example of unsafe excavation practices: The worker is in the trench without shoring, and standing directly beneath the excavator as it operates.



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In April 2021, a Long Island contracting company was ordered to cease all excavating operations and pay \$136,000 in penalties, the result of a trench collapse accident that killed two workmen in late 2020.

The resulting agreement also commits the company to do the following:

- Develop an excavation safety checklist to identify hazards and protective measures for work in excavations and ensure that a competent person on site will consult and complete the checklist whenever employees enter excavations.
- Engage a qualified professional safety and health consultant to conduct at least one on-site assessment of excavation safety while employees are performing work in an excavation.
- Provide companywide training on ladder safety and hardhat use to its employees.

Safety precautions shouldn't only be driven by punishment or trying to avoid OSHA violations. Protecting your employees, and yourself, should always be a top priority. Don't make extra effort for only a few weeks after being reminded about a tragic accident like this.

Systemic, lasting change is the only way to prevent these trench collapses from happening. Don't wait until after an accident to put safety procedures and training schedules in place.

If you've done this sort of work for many years, you may hear these stories about people dying in trenches and think, "That's someone else. I've been doing this a long time. I can tell when it's dangerous." But unfortunately, these accidents can happen to anyone and the training is not something anyone — no matter how experienced — should ignore.

The General Requirements Section of OSHA's Subpart P provides a number of commonsense steps to help ensure worker safety. As with any OSHA Standard or other safety procedure, it is important to always remember that these are the minimum requirements to ensure safe job sites.

Surface encumbrances

To ensure stability and integrity, they need to be removed or supported while an excavation is open. Examples include rocks, trees, telephone and utility poles, fire hydrants, etc.

Underground installations

Examples include gas, electrical, water, sewer lines, etc. They must be:

- Located and marked before beginning work. Property owners and/or utility companies should be notified at least 24 hours prior to digging, unless a longer time is required by local law. Some states require 72 hours advance notice. Most other states require 48 hours' notice.
- Protected, supported or removed while the trench is open.

Most states have so-called 811 One-Call laws. Simply dial 811 to contact the one-call center in your state.

Access and egress

These are fancy words for entering and exiting a trench. The requirements are:

- In trenches that are 4 feet or more in depth, provide a means of access and egress.
- Spacing between ladders, stairs or ramps should not be more than 50 feet.
- No worker should have to travel more than 25 feet laterally to reach a means of egress (exit).
- Ladders must be secured and extend 36 inches above the landing.

In addition, it is important to use wood or fiberglass ladders where there is a possibility of electric shock. Many utility companies and contractors always use wood or fiberglass ladders to ensure there is never a problem.