



## An accident waiting to happen? Preparation is key

### Definition of emergency

Almost any article on the use of forklift trucks and health and safety will point out the HSE's statistic that almost a quarter of accidents in the workplace involve forklift trucks. This does not mean that forklift trucks are inherently dangerous. It means that if you use these vehicles in your workplace you should manage them very carefully or expect an accident to occur.

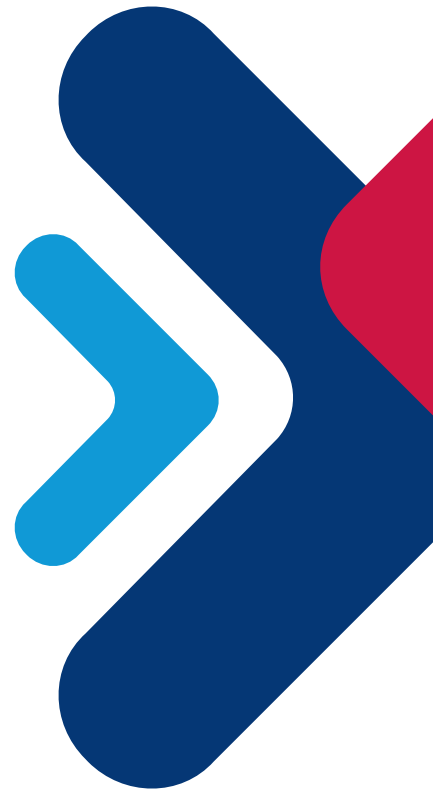
Of course, in practice no-one wants an accident, so policies and systems to try and prevent this are crucial. Effective preparation in this context means ensuring all the correct precautions, policies and safe systems of work are developed, communicated and enforced. If your systems are adequate and enforced then the likelihood of an accident is significantly reduced, and should one occur, you are far more likely to survive the subsequent investigation intact, i.e. without being prosecuted.

### Taking precautions

The policies and procedures relating to forklifts should be specific to the operation of this equipment in your workplace and specific to your required use of this equipment and even the equipment itself. Generic policies are often found gathering dust in a cupboard or somewhere on someone's computer in a file labelled "Health and Safety". However, documents of this ilk are seldom reviewed or opened, apart the initial flurry of enthusiasm when they are first created.

Sadly, this is very commonly the picture in many SME's and quite a few larger businesses as well. This type of approach, the "it is someone else's job" approach, will fail to adequately address the myriad of risks associated with forklift trucks. Furthermore, it demonstrates the organisation knew it had to address these safety concerns, as that is the reason the policies were bought in the first place, but then failed to act. This makes prosecution a slam dunk!

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## Taking precautions

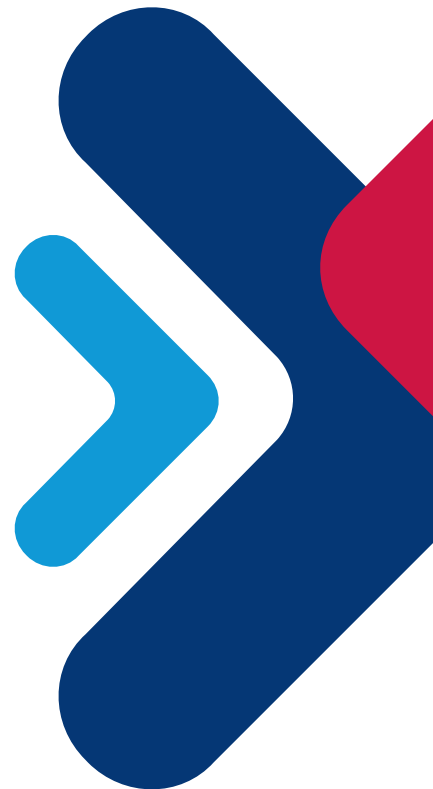
If correct policies and procedures are to be developed, it is important to consider every aspect of the use of forklift trucks in the workplace, not just the routine activities, whatever they may be, but also the occasional use to which they may be put. For example, to move un-palletted goods or equipment around, or perhaps they have been used to assist working from height or to assist in lifting cars or machinery in the workplace.

These types of use may be un-authorised, but if they have become habit or custom and practice, or remain unchallenged, then the employer would be seen to condone such potential misuse of their equipment. Therefore, as a starting point, define what use is authorised and what safe system of work is appropriate. Work out what is not authorised, without (at the very least) specific authorisation being given. One-off activities should be reviewed, risk assessed and a safe system of work developed to address the risks identified.

For the routine activities for which the truck was bought, a series of questions should be asked; for example: do they work in confined spaces? Do they get manoeuvred at speed or moved around different workspaces? Are they used daily or only occasionally? Who will be using them and who might be at risk of injury because they work in the proximity of these trucks being operated?

All these aspects should be properly considered by a trained health and safety person. This will in turn inform the detail needed in the policies and procedures and should provide a safe working routine in which the risks are significantly reduced to an acceptable level.

A good starting point is the ACOP Guidance [Rider-operated lift trucks: Operator training and safe use. Approved Code of Practice and guidance L117 \(hse.gov.uk\)](#) which covers key matters to take into account before using forklifts in the workplace. Incorporating the information in this guidance into your policies is sensible. If your systems follow the ACOP fully and are enforced robustly, it becomes very difficult for the HSE to take enforcement action against the business and therefore could provide a defence against prosecution. Far more importantly it becomes far less likely that, should the above have been implemented, an accident will happen at all.





## Communicating precautions

Even the best policies and procedures will be of no use if they are sat unread in a drawer in a manager's office. The policies should be communicated and trained to operatives and other staff in a way that is accessible and relevant to the staff member and their role. Don't fall into the trap of relying on the operatives and staff simply reading and signing policies. Instead, identify what is important, according to roles of the various members of the team, and ensure training on these systems, policies, etc. is delivered in an appropriate manner.

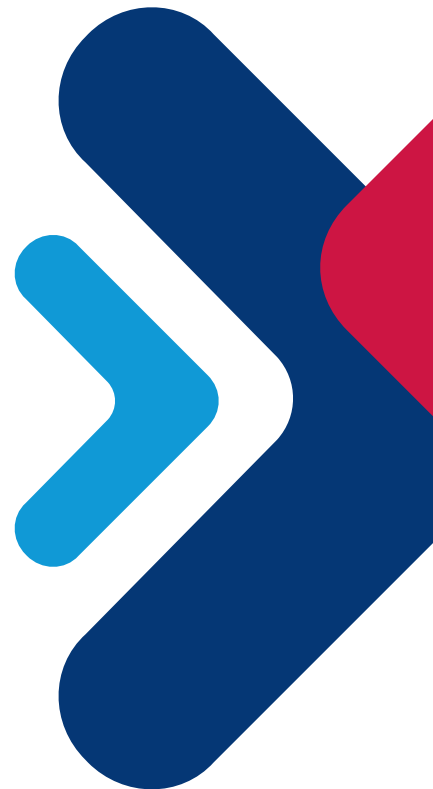
This should include classroom based training and practical demonstrations, testing and regular refresher training (e.g. in the case of a driver). Furthermore, you may need to consider forklift trucks as a wider part of your site rules, thinking things like pedestrian walkways and the use of banksmen, right down to individual rules on who is and is not permitted to operate the vehicles.

## Enforcing precautions

Forklift trucks are often used for repetitive tasks with operatives doing the same type of work and taking the same routes multiple times a day, for example stacking and unstacking shelves in a warehouse. A large part of the reason why accidents are common is complacency because of the repetitive nature of the job, meaning operatives switch off to the risks and start developing bad habits. In order to prevent this happening, regular refresher training is important. Also, taking formal action where individuals are seen in breach of the protocols - no matter how minor - reinforces the message across the whole team.

Near-misses should be dealt with in exactly the same procedural manner as accidents. Near-misses can be a valuable learning point to use as a catalyst for training and encourage an open culture of reporting. It may also be helpful to use 'drills' to practice the basics of responding to an accident – in the heat of the moment it can be hard to remember details such as making yourself and the vehicle safe or securing the area and warning others. There may be specific guidelines if you are working with ADR or Hazchem products, so ensure these are also taken into account, trained on and that the appropriate equipment is available, and the people involved are properly trained in their use.

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NATIONAL  
**FORKLIFT**  
**SAFETY DAY**

2024

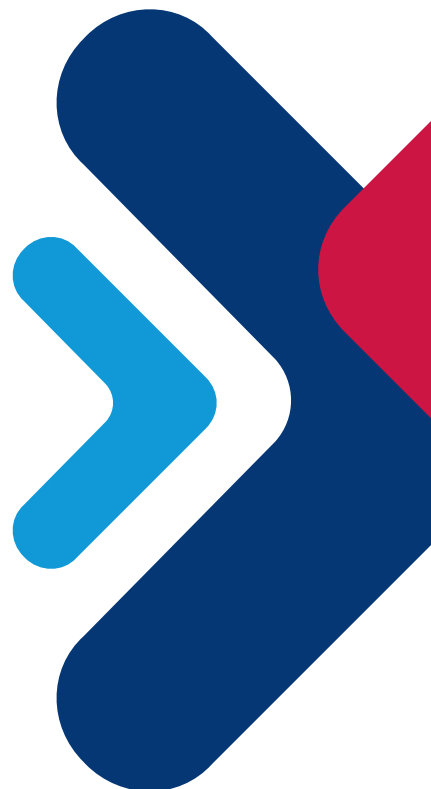


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## Enforcing precautions continues

In conclusion, whilst we all hope for the best, the key is to **prepare for the worst – in advance.**

Contact the regulatory team at Backhouse Jones for more information here: [contact](#) or on 01254 828300.



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