

Safety Scene

Forklift Safety: Common Sense from Behind the Wheel by Molly E. Butz

A combination of forklift maintenance, safety and common sense are the keys to avoiding accidents. Make sure everyone who operates a forklift at your facility reads this article!

Experts estimate that there are an average of 100 forklift fatalities and more than 36,000 serious forklift related injuries in the United States every year. Promoting safety and minimizing accidents will help to prevent your company from contributing to these statistics.

It's a good idea to start with the basics. Many forklift trucks weigh more than a car or light truck and are very powerful. The lifting system of a forklift is made up of chains attached to a hydraulic cylinder, and all forklifts work on the principle of balance. The front wheels serve as a pivot point between the weight of the truck and the weight of the load. Understanding these fundamental principles will pave the way to safe use.

Each day, before using a forklift, the equipment should be inspected. The basic safety equipment that needs to be checked includes the seat belt, warning light, backup alarm and horn. Each of the preceding items seems straightforward,

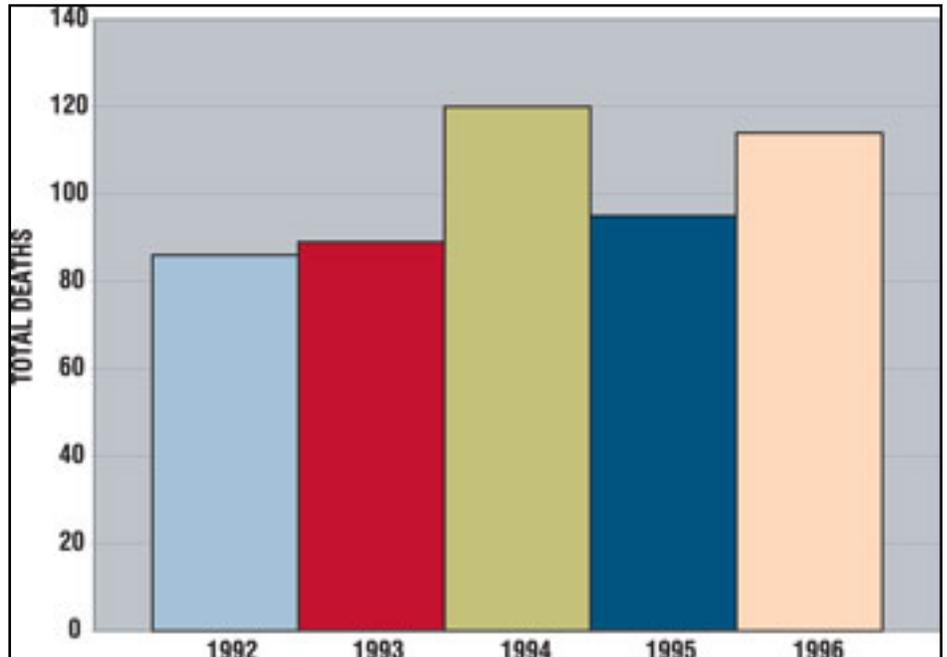


FIGURE 1. FORKLIFT FATALITIES 1992-1996



but they are critical to the safe operation of the vehicle.



The other general functions of the forklift should also be inspected, including:

- The steering wheel should not feel loose and the pump should not squeal.
- The brakes should depress smoothly and not require excessive force. Listen for grinding or screeching.
- On the upright, or mast, look for broken, chipped, misaligned, warped or worn parts.
- Check for leaks and cracking on all hoses.
- The fork pins and stop should be in place.
- Check to make sure the clutch is in good working condition.
- The movement of the hydraulic controls should be smooth and return to neutral when released.
- On the tires and wheels, look for damage, wear and missing bolts, also check air pressure in pneumatic tires.
- Keep track of how many hours your truck has been used; it will be important for scheduling maintenance.
- Check for other leaks, such as brake fluid, transmission oil, radiator coolant, battery acid or fuel.
- Check the air filter.

It's also no secret that all loads at a component manufacturing facility are not created equally. Sometimes loads are unusually long or surprisingly off-center, and occasionally a load requires the use of more than one forklift at the same time. (Only experienced operators should be used in cases like this.) But no matter how unusual your particular load is, the following tips can help make the process just a little easier.

- Take it slow and easy!
- Make all raising, lowering, tilting or traveling movements more slowly than usual.
- Always make a test lift with an unusual load. This will verify that your load is balanced and not too heavy for the forklift.
- Be sure the load is back as far as possible on the forks, properly bound and tilted toward the rear of the forklift.

Most importantly, like most safety precautions, the best thing you can use is common sense. There are many things to keep in mind when you operate a forklift. The following are a few good general guidelines to keep in mind for your safety and the safety of those around you:

- Keep your speed down.
- Stay to the right.
- Keep three vehicle lengths away from other vehicles.
- Remember that the pedestrian has the right of way.
- Keep your load as low to the ground as possible.
- If the load blocks your view, travel backwards.
- If your load must be raised while you travel, travel slowly.
- Watch for overhead obstructions.

- Do not try to push anything with the forklift.
- Always adjust the forks on the truck to fit your load and increase stability.
- Drive an empty truck backward UP an incline and forward DOWN an incline.
- Drive a loaded truck forward UP an incline and backward DOWN an incline.
- Never turn while driving up or down an incline.
- Avoid driving on problems surfaces, such as ice, mud, gravel, sand and soft dirt.
- If you must travel over pot holes, rough spots or railroad tracks, cross at an angle, one wheel at a time.
- Check to make sure the surface you will drive on can support the weight of the truck and load.
- Always park your truck in a safe, flat place, away from
- traffic; lower the forks to the ground; set the directional control to neutral; remove the key and set the parking brake.

To pose a question for this column or to learn more about WTCA's Operation Safety Program, contact WTCA Staff at 608/274-4849, email wtca@woodtruss.com, or view the Operation Safety demonstration online at www.wtcatko.com.

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