

FLATBED TARPING BEST PRACTICES

Trucking can be a dangerous occupation. Throw in handling an 80 to 120 pound tarp and working at heights that could exceed 13 feet in the air and the danger level is increased significantly. The potential for shoulder and back injuries from handling tarps or severe injuries and even death from falling is a real possibility while tarping a flatbed load. This is why it is important for drivers to have proper training, proper tools, and a plan in order to avoid these types of injuries.

Proper Training:

Many flatbed companies state that they only hire drivers with prior flatbed experience, and therefore do not conduct load securement and tarping training in orientation. Companies that do this are making a lot of assumptions that will eventually lead to an injury. Always ask yourself this question, "If we didn't train them who did?" Maybe everyone else made the same assumptions that you are. Was the driver ever actually trained? If so, was the program adequate? Did the driver perform well in the training? Was the training applicable to what the driver will do for you? Was the driver trained to perform the way that you will want him to? These are all questions that you will have a hard time determining the answers to unless you train the driver. Part of the training should consist of hands on practice. This will give you a chance to observe how the driver secures and tarps the loads before they go out on their own.



Proper Tools:

To perform any job safely requires the proper tools. Drivers must have the proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to help keep them safe both on the ground and up in the air. Gloves that offer protection but still allow for dexterity, hardhat, safety glasses, high visibility vest, and non-slip footwear are all suggested PPE for flatbed drivers. Many customers will require certain items at their facilities, and the company should check for these ahead of time. The right type, size, and number of tarps are important in order to prevent cargo damage and to make tarping the load easier and safer for the driver. Trying to "make it work" with the wrong configuration of tarps is never a good idea. In addition, having a ladder that is tall enough to extend 3 feet above the load is essential to safely mounting the load.

Planning:

Like every other job, safe tarping begins with having a good work plan. Safe tarping practices start way before the driver climbs on top of the load. Part of the planning process for the current load should begin after unloading the previous one. Tarps should be folded and rolled up in a way that makes them easier to lift and carry, and so that when they are placed on the top of the load they can be unrolled and positioned without having to flip them over or turn in a different direction.



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Below are some additional best practice tips that should be part of your plan to avoid injuries while tarping a load:

- When checking in at the shipper to load be sure to ask if they can place the tarp either on the rear section of the load before it is placed on the trailer or on top of the load after loading is complete. This will eliminate having to carry the tarp up a ladder which should be avoided at all costs due to the risk of injury. A best practice is to negotiate this before accepting the load as a condition of taking the load.
- Park in a place that is level so that you can position the ladder with the most stability and are not moving on a slope when on top of the load. If possible, park in an area that reduces the amount of vehicle traffic around you or at least makes it easier for others to see the driver when he is walking around the vehicle. When outside of the vehicle always wear a high visibility vest and never assume that others see you.
- Make sure that you put on the proper PPE prior to beginning the job.
- Place your ladder on a level surface and have it extend at least 3 feet above the load to allow for easier and safer mounting of the load.
- Once on top of the load scan the load for holes, sharp corners or edges, etc. that could damage your tarp or cause an injury while positioning the tarp. Also take the time to plan out how many tarps will be needed and the best placement for them.
- While on top of the load work on your hands and knees as much as possible to avoid falling. If you do have to walk, never walk backwards. Always walk forwards or slide sideways and keep your weight centered to maintain your balance. This allows you to see holes, gaps and other hazards that might cause you to slip, trip or fall.
- When climbing down from the load, be sure to climb all the way down to the ground, and watch for any hazards that you might step on such as rocks or holes. Remember that jumping down from the height of the flatbed deck subjects you to a force of 7 times your body weight!
- When using bungee cords to secure the tarp, be sure to always pull the bungee away from your body/face. Cords can break or fly loose and severely injure an eye or other facial feature. Always wear safety glasses when using bungee cords to prevent eye injuries.
- When removing tarps try grabbing by one corner and pull up and down to get air under the tarp. This can help to break the tarp loose and make it easier to remove. Use a steady, balanced tug-of-war pull and keep your arms between the waist and shoulders to reduce stress on the shoulders and maintain better center of gravity.
- Lastly, get the tarp neatly folded and rolled up to be ready for your next load.

As stated earlier, trucking is a dangerous occupation. By following the tips mentioned in this article you should be able to reduce your injury exposure and make it home in one piece. Lastly, probably the best piece of advice is to take your time and do not take unnecessary risks. Most accidents are caused by unsafe acts implemented to try to save time and effort.