

SURVIVAL TIPS

Suggestions to keep you healthy and free of injury

Confined space work

Do you occasionally need to enter a tank, roof space, sewer, well, excavation, offal pit or other confined space, or any environment where there may be a shortage of oxygen? Then you are at risk, and arguably more so than people like maintenance contractors who do this sort of work often.

Are your confined space entry tasks usually unplanned? Lack of planning - and poor perception of risk - can kill you. You need oxygen to survive. Lack of it will knock you out before you even see the punch coming. Death follows quickly.

Note that all tasks carried out in a confined space must comply with the provisions of Australian Standard AS 2865, as promoted by OSH. If you and your supervisor aren't familiar with this, don't even think about entering a confined space!

Tip 1: Acknowledge the risk

Entry into a confined space is potentially a high-risk activity. Entry must be strictly controlled and precautions agreed upon. Preferably, adopt an entry permit system so that you and others are aware of the hazards to which you might be exposed. Plan the task well ahead.

Tip 2: Five steps to safety

Here are five steps to assess and manage the risk.

1. Check: is there sufficient oxygen? (21% of air volume for your safety).
2. Check: are there noxious substances present? (gases, flammable liquids, vapour or other harmful matter that could give off fumes.)
3. Issue the permit. (Once the confined space is declared safe, document the oxygen and noxious readings and record them on your permit-

to-enter.)

4. Define the safe system of work (the work methods for the task to be done.)

5. Implement this system of work and continue to monitor it.

Tip 3: Is your supervisor competent?

Make sure there is a competent person to supervise you and anyone else working in or near a confined space. This person is to authorise your entry as safe and ensure all necessary safety precautions have been taken.

Tip 4: Are you competent?

Don't enter or work in a confined space unless you and anyone else working there have received training in the hazards of that confined space.

Tip 5: Someone to rescue you

Rescue procedures must be part of the training. Never rely on one person alone to lift injured or unconscious people out of a confined space, unless they are equipped with special lifting appliances. Rescue equipment, including emergency breathing apparatus, must be available near the entrance at all times. Rescue harnesses should be worn by all those inside the confined space, with a lifeline attached to the harness and a suitable winching mechanism at the point of entry.

Tip 6: Never work alone

Never enter a confined space unless someone else is present in the immediate vicinity, outside the confined space., to keep watch and communicate with you, and initiate emergency response actions if required.

Tip 7: Can you get out again?

Ensure there is a safe means

of entry and exit to and from a confined space. It is easy to get stuck in tanks, building spaces or structures.

Tip 8: No extra hazards, please

Do not introduce a hazard into a confined space. For example, petrol or diesel engines should not be used inside, but sited outside in a well-ventilated area. When painting, use water-based material where possible, and avoid paints and adhesives which give off dangerous solvent vapours.

Tip 9: Breathe safely

If you need to ventilate, ensure that forced ventilation or mechanical extraction is provided to expel fumes to a safe area, free from potential sources of ignition. Wear appropriate respiratory protection where the results of gas monitoring indicate that a safe atmosphere cannot be established. Do not try to enrich an oxygen-deficient atmosphere with pure oxygen (in case of explosion). Do not try to clear fumes or gases with pure oxygen.

Tip 10: Stop and think

Can you think of a safe way to do the task without entering the space? If not, think hard about the risks and go over the standard safety procedures.

Disclaimer:

these survival tips are general in nature and are not intended to be comprehensive. Always take into account your own particular circumstances. If you have any questions, please discuss them with your supervisor.

This issue's survival tips supplied by Auckland-based consultancy TQM Safety Ltd.