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Be Concerned About Ladder Safety As Autumn Chores Loom

By: **Tera Schmidt**
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But Dr. Eric Watson, a foot and ankle specialist who sees patients in Yankton monthly, advises decorating go-getters to avoid ladder mishaps that may ruin holiday plans by using ladders properly.

"I am currently working with a patient who fell off a ladder when he was siding his house. He broke both of his heels," said Watson, who works with Orthopedic Institute in Sioux Falls. "It generally takes six weeks for a foot or ankle injury to heal, but that is after the surgery. Most cases are surgical but we have to wait to complete the surgery until the swelling goes down. A foot or ankle injury could really ruin your holiday season."

The number of nonfatal ladder injuries in ER's jumped 50 percent from 1990 to 2005. According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, more than 547,000 people were treated in hospital emergency rooms, doctors' offices and clinics in 2004 because of injuries related to ladder use.

Watson said the most common injuries he sees are broken ankles and feet, but it all depends on how a person falls.

"If you jump of and land on your feet, you're probably going to do some damage to your feet or ankles, but if you land on your hands, you can harm your wrists, hands or arms," he said. "You could also fall on your back and hurt your head or neck."

Oftentimes, falls cause injuries in several areas, Watson said.

"There is almost always an associated injury to go with the broken bones," he said. "A common one is a compound compression fracture in your back, which is very painful."

Watson offered these tips to avoid injuries while working on ladders:

- Always inspect the ladder to make sure it is in good working condition.

"Make sure there is no excess mud on the rungs that could cause you to slip and make sure all the ladder components are working properly," he said.

"Make sure the hinges are locked out and all the legs are as levels possible," Watson said.

- Always face the ladder when climbing and wear clothing that allows you to keep a good grip on the rungs.
- Place the ladder as close to where you'll be working as possible.

"You don't want to have to reach off the ladder very far," Watson said. "The further from the center of gravity you are, the more likely you'll tip the ladder."

- If possible, have someone hold the ladder.

"This is especially important if you don't have a good, level surface," he said.

- Never step on the top rung or the paint bucket shelf.

"Do exactly as the label says and stay off," he said. "(Ladder manufacturers) really mean it, the warning labels are there for a reason."

- Use a job-appropriate ladder.

"You don't need to use a 14-foot ladder to reach up three feet," he said. "The higher up you are, the more worried you should get because the ladder will be less stable. Make sure your ladder is the appropriate height for the job."

Some common sense and a bit of planning will go a long way in preventing ladder injuries, Watson said.

"The old adage, 'An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,' is certainly true here," he said.

Savvy homeowners may want to get a jump-start on holiday decorating this month before the temperatures dip too low and the snow begins to fly.

The number of nonfatal ladder injuries in ER's jumped 50 percent from 1990 to 2005. According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, more than 547,000 people were sent to the hospital emergency room, and 10,000 people died in 2006 because of injuries related to ladders by using ladders improperly.

Watson said the most common injuries he sees from ladders are falls and falling but it also depends on the person. "It generally takes six weeks for a foot or ankle injury to heal, but that is after the surgery, jumps, casts and surgery but you have probably to complete the surgery and the swelling goes down. A foot and ankle injury can really ruin your holiday season hands or arms," he said. "You could also fall on your back and hurt your head or neck."

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