

TOOLBOX TALK · EXCAVATION

Trench Safety

About 10 minutes to deliver

A cubic yard of soil weighs about as much as a car. Protective systems, the five-foot myth, and why you never enter to help.

A cubic yard of soil weighs around 3,000 pounds — about a small car. It does not have to bury you to kill you; a couple of feet across the chest is enough to stop you breathing. Cave-ins happen without warning and there is no outrunning one.

THE FIVE-FOOT RULE IS NOT WHAT PEOPLE THINK IT IS

1926.652(a)(1) requires every employee in an excavation to be protected from cave-ins, except where the excavation is entirely in stable rock, or it is less than five feet deep and a competent person has examined the ground and found no indication of a potential cave-in.

Both halves of that second exception have to be true. "It's only four feet" on its own is not the rule, and a competent person who has not looked is not an examination.

Protection means one of:

- Sloping or benching the walls back to a safe angle
- Shoring — supporting the walls
- Shielding — a trench box, which does not stop a collapse but keeps it off you

Anything deeper than 20 feet needs a protective system designed by a registered professional engineer.

EVERY DAY, BEFORE ANYONE GOES IN

- A competent person inspects the excavation, the adjacent area and the protective systems — daily, after rain, and after anything that changes conditions.
- Ladder within 25 feet of any worker in a trench four feet or deeper.
- Spoil pile at least two feet back from the edge. It is the load most likely to come back in on you.
- Locate utilities first. Call 811 and hand-dig around anything marked.
- Water changes everything. No entry into a trench with accumulated water unless the hazard has been dealt with.

IF SOMEONE IS BURIED

Do not go in. More than half the people who die in trenches are rescuers. Call 911, keep everyone back, and stop any equipment vibrating the ground nearby. Trench rescue is a specialist job and the specialists are already on their way.

ASK THE CREW

- Who is the competent person on this excavation, and when did they last inspect it?
- Where is the ladder, and is it within 25 feet of everyone working in the trench?
- How far back is the spoil pile from the edge?

29 CFR 1926.651 · 29 CFR 1926.652

This is a toolbox talk, not a course. It is general awareness on one topic — not site-specific, not a hazard assessment, and not a substitute for assessment of your workplace by a competent person, your written programs, or manufacturers' instructions. It does not by itself satisfy any OSHA training requirement. Regulations change; verify against the current standard. Whoever delivers it is responsible for deciding it is suitable and sufficient for the work. Where a talk covers first aid, resuscitation, or mental health it is general safety information, not medical advice, not a substitute for professional medical care or certified emergency-response training, and it confers no certification — in an emergency, call 911. Free to print and use, as is, with no warranty of any kind. Migna Safety Solutions · training.mignasafety.com

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ATTENDANCE RECORD

Trench Safety

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Date

Job / site

Delivered by

Company

#	Print name	Signature	Date
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I delivered this talk and determined it was suitable for this crew and this work.

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