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Do Fall Protection Harnesses Have a Defined Expiration Date?

Factors that impact the lifespan of a fall harness and a five-step procedure for inspection



WE KNOW WHAT'S AT STAKE.

Do Fall Protection Harnesses Have a Defined Expiration Date?

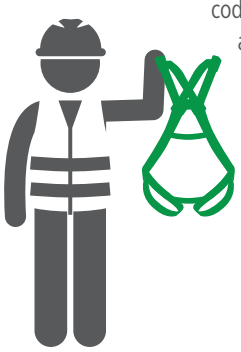
One of the most frequently asked questions when it comes to fall protection PPE is *"Do fall harnesses have a defined expiration date?"* While in years past, the typical recommendation would have been a five-year lifespan, that is not always the case.

So, is there a fall protection harness expiration date, beyond which they're deemed unusable?

The answer is both yes … and no. Here's why.

Who Defines a Fall Protection Harness's Expiration Date or End Of Life?

There is no such thing as a predetermined or mandated expiration date on fall protection harnesses. Neither OSHA nor ANSI have current codes or standards that set a specific time period for taking a harness out of service. Even most manufacturers will not suggest how long a harness will last.



In fact, the only person who can truly determine when a harness is due for removal is the user or a competent, trained inspector. More important than who determines its end of life is what determines it.

The Potential Problem With a Mandated Expiration Date

Having a mandated expiration date for a fall protection harness may seem like a good thing at first glance. However, a definite expiration date could impact things like wearer complacency; for example, the user might skip inspecting for defects each time the harness is used, as long as it is within the anticipated lifespan. And a false sense of security may cause the recommended annual competent-person inspection to be put off or even skipped.

Things That Affect a Fall Protection Harness's Useful Lifespan

Any harness subjected to a fall arrest must be taken out of service immediately. Do not use the harness after the impact event. It must be labeled as unusable and removed from service until destroyed.

In addition, as with any PPE (personal protective equipment), a full-body fall protection harness must be cared for and used properly. Some of the things that may affect lifespan adversely are:

- **Snagging on protruding objects** might cause tears to the harness's fabric or stitching. This can cause a weak spot that could fail during a fall arrest.
- **Coating or saturation of paints and other chemicals** can weaken the synthetic materials used in the webbing construction. Remove these contaminants as soon as possible, following the manufacturer's guidelines to avoid further deterioration.
- **Excessive exposure to UV rays or sunlight** may cause deterioration or weakening of synthetic fibers. When the harness is not in use, store it away from sunlight.
- **Exposure to caustics and acids** may deteriorate the metal components, such as the D-ring and buckles. Clean these items as soon as possible using approved methods.
- **Improper storage methods can damage the harness.** The harness should be stored in a hanging position so that the webbing can "relax." Hang the harness by the D-ring, not the webbing.
- **Any harness subjected to a fall arrest must be taken out of service immediately.** Do not use the harness after the impact event. It must be labeled as unusable and removed from service until destroyed.

The Only Way to Determine a Harness's Usability is Through Routine Inspection



Checking the harness carefully for damage is the only reliable way to determine its condition. This includes a pre-use check by the user before donning the equipment, and periodic inspections by a qualified, competent inspector.

A competent inspector will be trained in proper inspection procedures and should document each harness's inspection with a log sheet. An inspector should not be the person wearing that particular harness. The log sheet used should match the exact harness. The closer look an inspector gives the equipment ensures the harness is inspected properly.

ANSI recommends that formal inspections should be done at intervals of no more than six months. If a harness has not been formally inspected within that six-month period, MSA recommends that it be taken out of service and tagged unusable until a formal inspection is completed, including documentation.

A Five Step Procedure for Harness Inspection

Here are the five steps you should follow in doing a formal inspection.

1. **Inspect all webbing and stitching**
Check for cuts, fraying, pulled or broken threads, abrasions, excessive wear, altered or missing straps, burns, UV damage, and heat and chemical exposures. Starting at one end of a webbing length, grasp the webbing with hands eight inches apart and flex the fabric. This can expose any defects not seen with the webbing in a straight alignment.

2. **Inspect all metal or plastic components of the harness**
All harness buckles should work freely, engaging and disengaging fully and smoothly. Make sure each type of buckle, including any quick-connect buckle, is functioning properly. Look for deformation, crack, corrosion, deep pitting or burrs, sharp edges, nicks or cuts, exposure to excessive heat or chemicals, and any other damage. Missing, loose or improperly working parts should be noted. This should include both metal and plastic components.

3. **Inspect all load indicators**
Load indicators are sections of the harness webbing that are folded over and stitched securely. Ripped stitching, even if only partially separated, is an indicator that the harness has been subjected to a fall and is no longer providing adequate protection. Remove the harness from service immediately. Mark it as unusable and remove from service until destroyed.

4. **Inspect all labels**
To fully pass inspection, labels must be present and readable. Make sure the unique identifier for the harness is legible so that it can be marked properly on the log sheet.

5. **Complete all inspection documentation**
A formal inspection is not done until the paper work is filled out. Create a log sheet, covering all the check points for the harness. Complete, fully itemized **inspection checklists** are available for all MSA V-SERIES® harnesses. These checklists have a place to enter condition codes and overall assessment scores, and room for the inspector to make comments. Keep in mind that an assessment doesn't work on a sliding scale. The component, no matter what it is, gets a Pass or Fail rating. There is no in-between.

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