

Hard Hat Service Life:

A question that often comes up is whether OSHA specifies a service life for hard hats.

The answer is NO. When it comes to things like service life, specific care and cleaning procedures, and other equipment-specific requirements, OSHA tends to view the equipment manufacturers as the experts on their own equipment.

While OSHA requires that workers must be protected from hazards, they try to give equipment manufacturers and employers flexibility when it comes to *how* they will meet this requirement.

Because of this, and because something like equipment service life is highly dependent on factors like the work environment and the task being performed, OSHA generally tries to avoid making a specific requirement.

In other words, check your hard hat documentation or contact the manufacturer to determine your hard hat's service life!



Hard Hats Are Better Than Hard Heads

It probably doesn't take much to convince you that a blow to the head is one of most serious types of injuries you can experience. Because your head houses delicate sensory organs like your eyes, ears, nose, mouth and brain, any damage to your head can easily lead to lifelong impairment or even death. So, let's use that brain for a few minutes to think about head protection.

The OSHA General Industry standard requires head protection anytime there's a potential for injury due to falling objects or electrical shock and burns. The Construction standard expands on this by saying that head protection is required anytime you're at potential risk from impacts, flying objects, falling objects, and electrical shock and burns. When these hazards may be present, both standards require you to use head protection that complies with the ANSI Z89.1 standard.

The Z89.1 ANSI Standard describes testing and performance requirements for hard hats and other protective helmets. It divides head protection into Types and Classes.

Hard hat Types are related to what area of the head is protected from impact hazards.

- Type I Hard Hat: Provides protection from strikes to the top of the head. This is the most common Type of hardhat used in the U.S.
- Type II Hard Hat: Provides protection from strikes to the top, sides and back of the head.

Hard hat Classes are related to the level of electrical shock protection they provide.

- Class G Hard Hat (General Service): Proof-tested to 2,200 volts
- Class E Hard Hat (Electrical): Proof-tested to 20,000 volts
- Class C Hard Hat (Conductive): Offers no electrical protection

In addition to the standard hard hat, you may have seen things like bump caps or even climbing style safety helmets in various workplaces and wondered if they comply with the OSHA requirement for head protection.

Bump caps don't meet the ANSI Z89.1 standard, and so can't be used when OSHA requires head protection. That doesn't mean bump caps have no value at your workplace. As the name implies, bump caps are useful in situations where head protection is NOT required, but where you may be a risk for "bumping" your head into stationary objects. Bump caps tend to be lighter, more form fitting, and more comfortable than a standard hard hat. But remember, they should NOT be used where ANSI-compliant hard hats are required. Before deciding that a bump cap is appropriate, make sure that a thorough head-hazard evaluation has been completed at your workplace.

Climbing style safety helmets are getting more popular in the U.S., so many manufacturers have introduced ANSI Z89.1 compliant versions. Safety helmets provide greater visibility due to their brim-less design, are more secure due to chin straps, feature a highly adjustable suspension, and can integrate other PPE like attached earmuffs and face shields.

No matter what type of head protection you choose, make sure to inspect it before each use and follow the manufacturer's requirements for care, cleaning, and storage. General things to avoid:

- Storing your hard hat in direct sunlight
- Painting the shell of your hard hat
- Cleaning your hard hat with chemical solvents
- Drilling or cutting into your hard hat