CrewSigned

Trench Safety Toolbox Talk

5-minute read-aloud · Last reviewed November 24, 2026

Trench collapses happen fast and without warning. One moment the walls look solid and the next they are on top of you. A single cubic yard of soil can weigh as much as a car. A worker caught in a collapse, even if they are only buried to the waist, can be crushed or suffocated before anyone can dig them out. That is why trench work has strict rules, and we follow every one of them.

Any trench five feet deep or more needs a protective system, unless it is dug entirely in stable rock. There are three main kinds. Sloping cuts the walls back at an angle so they cannot fall in. Shoring uses supports to hold the walls in place. Shielding, like a trench box, protects the workers inside if the walls do fail. Deeper trenches, twenty feet or more, need a system designed by an engineer. Never get into an unprotected trench, even for a minute, and never work outside the trench box.

A competent person inspects the trench and the protective system every day before work starts, and again after rain or anything else that could change the conditions. They are looking for cracks, bulging walls, water, falling soil and damage to the shoring or shield. If they say get out, everyone gets out.

Keep the edges clear. Spoil piles, materials and equipment must be kept at least two feet back from the edge. The weight of heavy equipment parked too close can cause a collapse, and anything sitting on the edge can fall in on you.

Have a way out. Trenches four feet deep or more need a ladder, ramp or steps, placed so nobody has to travel more than twenty-five feet to reach it. Keep it clear.

Watch the air and water. In deeper trenches or near sewers, landfills and fuel tanks, the air may need to be tested. Do not work in a trench with water building up unless the right controls are in place.

Know where utilities are. Lines must be located and marked before we dig.

Finally, look out for people walking near the edge and for falling loads from equipment working over the trench. If something feels wrong, get out first and ask questions after.

Discussion questions

1. Who is the competent person for our trench today, and what did their inspection find?
2. How deep is our trench, and what protective system are we using?
3. Where is the closest way out of the trench from where you will be working?

OSHA standard

29 CFR 1926.652, Requirements for protective systems
https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/regulations/standardnumber/1926/1926.652

SOURCES

Trench Collapses Can Be Deadly: OSHA Alert (OSHA 3971): https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/publications/OSHA3971.pdf
Trenching Safety: 5 Things You Should Know to Stay Safe (OSHA 3974): https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/publications/OSHA3974.pdf
Trench Safety QuickCard (OSHA 3243): https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/publications/TRENCH_SAFETY_TIPS_CARD.pdf
OSHA Safety and Health Topics, Trenching and Excavation: https://www.osha.gov/trenching-excavation

This talk does not replace training that an OSHA standard requires. Scripts are based on OSHA and NIOSH publications and rewritten in plain language.

Safety Meeting Sign-In Sheet

TOPIC

Trench Safety Toolbox Talk

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DATE

TIME

PRESENTER

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