



## Call Before You Dig: Six Tips for Avoiding Buried Utilities

As temperatures rise and excavation projects increase, prioritizing safety is crucial. April is National Safe Digging Month, a time to raise awareness about excavation hazards and the risks of striking underground utilities and pipelines – also known as “dig-ins.” In the U.S., more than **550 “dig-ins” occur every day\*** – each posing serious dangers to workers and communities.

Did you know that every digging project – no matter the size – requires contacting 811 before work begins? Whether online or by phone, [your state’s 811 service](#) will guide you through a simple process. After answering questions about the details and location of your project, you’ll receive a free ticket number and information on how much time your local utilities have to mark their underground lines. Before you dig, it’s important to confirm that all utilities have responded and marked their lines.

By following a few key safety steps—including contacting 811 before every dig—you can help ensure smooth and incident-free excavations. Whether you’re working on a large construction project or a routine dig, here are six must-follow excavation safety tips:

- 1. Always Have a Valid 811 Ticket.** [Contact 811](#) a few business days before every dig – no exceptions. Before starting work, double-check that your ticket is valid and includes the correct location, start and end dates, contractor details, and project type.
- 2. Confirm Utility Responses Before Digging.** Before breaking ground, review your 811 ticket to ensure all utility companies have responded by marking your site or clearing your ticket. Physically inspect the area for any above-ground signs of unmarked underground utilities before proceeding, such as pedestals, manhole covers or meter boxes.
- 3. Protect Utility Markings.** Once utilities are marked, it’s your responsibility to preserve flags, stakes, and paint markings. If weather or site conditions make the markings unclear, request a remark from 811 before continuing work.
- 4. Pothole or Test Dig to Expose Utilities.** Utility markings are approximate, and congested underground environments can lead to mismarks. To safely verify utility locations, use hand tools or soft-dig methods (such as vacuum excavation) within the “tolerance zone,” the designated safety margin surrounding marked utilities that demands careful, non-mechanical excavation practices. This is the only way to accurately confirm underground utilities.

- 5. Use Caution with Heavy Equipment.** Even after verifying utility locations, exercise extreme caution when operating heavy machinery near buried lines. Backhoes cause the most damage to underground utilities, so operators [should designate an “observer” to help prevent dig-ins.](#)
  
- 6. OSHA’s 3 S’s: Slope it. Shore it. Shield It.** Soil is heavy, and trench collapses can be fatal. Always follow trench safety best practices: slope trench walls at a safe angle or bench them in steps; shore trench walls with protective supports; and shield workers using trench boxes. These precautions protect workers inside and around excavations.

Remember, 811 helps protect you and your community by preventing utility strikes that can disrupt service, lead to costly repairs, or cause serious injuries and fatalities. Before any digging project, always contact your [state's 811 center](#), wait for utilities to respond, and confirm that all utilities have marked their lines before you put a shovel in the ground.

The [Common Ground Alliance](#), a member of OSHA’s [Partners for Safe Trenching and Excavation Operations Alliance](#), raises awareness and promotes best practices to reduce risks associated with trenching, excavation, and related construction hazards.

For additional information and resources related to Excavation and Trenching, go to the safety and health topics page for [Excavation and Trenching](#) along with the webpage [Does "Subpart P - Excavations" Apply to You?](#)