

ADA Truncated Domes: Love ‘em or Hate ‘em, they are here to stay.

By Bill Scott, Abilities UNlimited, Inc.



Whether you love them, or hate them, or even if you don't know what they are, truncated domes are here to stay. They are about to proliferate the landscape the way handicapped parking signs have become omnipresent in parking lots from Harlem to Hawaii. They're coming, folks. And in a few more years you won't be able to cross a street at any intersection – large or small, without bumbling, rumbling, and stumbling over these annoying little inverted dimples. But just as you're about to spout out a few expletives, remember, truncated domes serve a very useful and necessary purpose. They warn people who are blind, as well as sighted people who aren't paying attention, that they're about to walk out into the path of vehicular traffic.

What are truncated domes?

As I stated previously, albeit a bit irreverently, truncated domes are detectable warnings that, for lack of a better description, resemble bumps or inverted dimples you see across the walkway as you're leaving the large Wal-Mart or PetSmart stores. Truncated domes can be found at almost any curb ramp, at most intersections or at sidewalks leading into a parking lot.

Section 3.5 of The Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines describes detectable warnings, a.k.a., truncated domes, in the following manner:

A detectable warning is "a standardized surface feature built in or applied to walking surfaces or other elements to warn visually impaired people of hazards on a circulation path" (ADAAG, U.S. Access Board, 1991).

Research has shown that because of the unique design of truncated domes, they are more easily detectable by people who are blind or visually impaired than other surfaces, such as grooves or aggregate (Peck & Bentzen, 1987).

ADAAG 4.29.2 states:

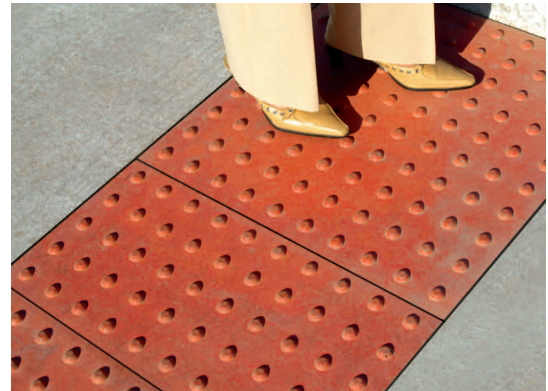
** Detectable Warnings on Walking Surfaces shall consist of raised truncated domes with a diameter of nominal 0.9 in (23 mm), a height of nominal 0.2 in (5 mm) and a centertocenter spacing of nominal 2.35 in (60 mm) and shall contrast visually with adjoining surfaces, either light on dark, or dark on light.*

If this sounds a bit technical, that's because it is technical out of necessity. If there is one thing that is of great benefit for people who are blind, it's consistency. Acknowledging this fact, U.S. Access Board that writes the accessibility codes and standards for the nation has specified the precise diameter, height, and spacing for the truncated domes. Companies that manufacture truncated domes must follow these guidelines to a T, or risk not only non-compliance with the law, but also potentially endangering someone who needs these detectable warnings as a matter of life or death. It is at least in part for this reason, truncated domes are the *only* detectable warnings allowed by ADAAG.

Buyer Beware!

Caveat emptor, more commonly stated as, “let the buyer beware” is a fair warning, and cannot be a more appropriate admonishment than when questioning which truncated domes are the right ones. Just as there are hundreds, if not thousands, of products that are manufactured and sold every day that are not right for the intended purpose of the purchaser, the same is true with truncated domes. The options range from glue down plastic versions to products that are simply incorrect in their design and non-compliant with the ADAAG requirements.

Now, no one is going to twist anyone’s arm, or threaten anyone with bodily harm if they don’t make a certain purchase from a certain vendor. But the fact of the matter is, bodily harm can be the result of a non-judicious purchase when it comes to detectable warnings. Truncated domes that are manufactured and made of materials that wear out in a short time will leave that point of transition from the pedestrian walkway into the path of vehicular traffic with no warning for the unsuspecting person who is blind or visually impaired. As you can well imagine, the results can be catastrophic.



*RampDome Systems – ADA
Detectable Warning Surfaces*

At the very least, even without the occurrence of physical injury to an individual, there is the avoidable cost of having to frequently replace truncated domes that have been worn down to a smooth surface after only a few years of use. For a private business with dozens of properties in many cities or states, this can create a significant and unnecessary financial burden. And if you think the cost can be great for a private sector business, just imagine the fiscal impact on a municipality with literally hundreds of thousands of curb ramps.

In my next article I will talk more about the placement guidelines for truncated domes, and answer some frequently asked questions about the required depth and width, and application to flared sides, and the relationships of truncated domes to direction and way finding.

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