

OSHA Offers Tips to Protect Workers in Cold Environments

Working in cold environments can be dangerous. More than 700 people die of hypothermia each year in the United States. To help protect workers in cold environments, OSHA reminds employers and workers to learn about cold related illnesses and use proper precautions.

Prolonged exposure to freezing or cold temperatures can result in health problems such as trench foot, frostbite and hypothermia. When the body is unable to warm itself, serious cold-related illnesses and injuries may occur, and permanent tissue damage and death may result.

Cold-related illnesses can slowly overcome a person who has been chilled by low temperatures, brisk winds or wet clothing. Danger signs include uncontrolled shivering, slurred speech, clumsy movements, fatigue and confused behavior. If these signs are observed, call for emergency help.

How to Protect Yourself

- Recognize the environmental and workplace conditions that lead to potential cold-induced illnesses and injuries.
- Learn the signs and symptoms of cold-induced illnesses/injuries and what to do to help other workers.
- Wear proper clothing for cold, wet and windy conditions. Layer clothing to adjust to changing temperatures. Wear a hat and gloves, in addition to underwear that will keep water away from the skin (polypropylene).
- Take frequent short breaks in warm dry shelters to allow the body to warm up.
- Try to schedule work for the warmest part of the day.
- Avoid exhaustion or fatigue because energy is needed to keep muscles warm.
- Use the buddy system -- work in pairs so that one worker can recognize danger signs.
- Drink warm, sweet beverages (sugar water, sports-type drinks) and avoid drinks with caffeine (coffee, tea, sodas or hot chocolate) or alcohol.
- Eat warm, high-calorie foods such as hot pasta dishes.
- Remember, you face increased risks when you take certain medications, are in poor physical condition or suffer from illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension or cardiovascular disease.

Dress right, eat right work right and you will stay well protected and comfortable through the winter months.

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