

Cold-related Injuries

Most people know that working in hot weather places workers at risk of heat exhaustion and heatstroke; however, working in cold weather also poses health risks. According to the CDC, cold-related injuries and illnesses can occur in temperatures as high as 60°F.

Hypothermia

One of the biggest risks of cold exposure is hypothermia, which occurs when body temperature drops below 95°F. Hypothermia can cause confusion, so people experiencing it often do not realize they are at risk until the condition has progressed. Symptoms of hypothermia include:

Early Symptoms

- Shivering
- Fatigue
- Loss of coordination
- Confusion and dis-orientation

Late Symptoms

- No shivering
- Blue skin
- Dilated pupils
- Slowed pulse and breathing
- Loss of consciousness

Frostbite

Frostbite, another cold-related injury, occurs when part of the body freezes causing tissue damage. Extremities like fingers, toes, ears, and the nose are the most prone to frostbite. Early symptoms include numbness, tingling, stinging, or pain on or near the affected area. The colder it is the faster frostbite occurs. Prolonged frostbite may require that the damaged tissue (i.e., fingers, toes, etc.) be removed to prevent additional health problems.

Other Injuries

While hypothermia and frostbite are perhaps the most serious cold-weather related injuries, working

in the cold also puts you at risk for conditions like trench foot and chilblains. Trench foot occurs with prolonged exposure to wet and cold. Like frostbite it's symptoms include numbness and tingling of the skin. It can also lead to tissue damage and, if left untreated, gangrene. Chilblains are small ulcers formed by damaged blood vessels in the skin. Symptoms include redness, itching, blistering, inflammation, and in severe cases open wounds in the skin.

Be Prepared

When working outside in winter, it is important to be prepared for the weather conditions. This means wearing appropriate clothing and footwear. Wearing several loose layers of clothing will provide better insulation than a single layer as well as allowing you to remove layers if needed. If working in snow, be sure to wear waterproof shoes with good traction. Gloves and a hat should also be worn. You lose body heat through exposed skin, so cover up as much as necessary without compromising freedom of movement.

What This Means to Counties

As winter continues, beware of the risk of cold-related injuries. Take the proper precautions by wearing appropriate clothing, protecting extremities, wearing water-proof footwear, and limiting time outside as much as possible. Also monitor yourself and your co-workers for signs of hypothermia and other cold-related injuries. For more information about safe working conditions in