



eSource Newsletter

Winter Hazards Preparation : Slips, Trips and Falls.

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Cold and winter workplace injuries can be best avoided with proper preparation. Here are some of the most common winter hazards and how to best prepare for them.

Common Cold-Stress Injuries

Cold-stress illnesses and injuries are hazards that can keep employees away from work for a significant amount of time, which hurts productivity and morale. The most common of these winter injuries include hypothermia, frostbite.

Hypothermia happens during prolonged exposure to cool or cold temperatures, which can cause the body to lose heat faster than it can produce it and makes body temperatures drop below 95 degrees, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). It is a serious health threat, even in moderately cool temperatures. If the body's core temperature stays too low for too long, it affects the brain and renders a victim unable to think clearly or move well. Symptoms include shivering, exhaustion, confusion, fumbling hands, memory loss, slurred speech and drowsiness. If left untreated, the condition can be deadly.

Frostbite is exposing body parts to below normal body temperatures for an extended amount of time. Layers of skin freeze and the body loses feeling and color in affected areas. This can permanently damage the body and, in extreme cases, can require amputation. The most common spots for frostbite are the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers and toes. Early symptoms include redness or pain in any skin area followed by a white or grayish-yellow skin area. The skin affected feels unusually firm and waxy and is usually numb.

First Line of Defense

The first line of defense against any cold-stress injury is proper clothing. Workers exposed to the elements during cold-weather months must be dressed appropriately to stay warm. This includes water-resistant coats and boots, mittens and gloves, several layers of loose-fitting clothing, hats, scarves or balaclava that cover the face and mouth. Workers should try to stay as dry as possible and take regular breaks to warm up either inside or in sheltered, dry spaces.

The CDC recommends business owners schedule outdoor work in cold areas for warmer months or warmer times of the day; cut back on workers' physical demands; bring in relief workers or extra workers for tough and time-consuming jobs and offer warm liquids.

Before winter hits, businesses and organizations should also develop a rapid response plan. They should train employees to recognize the signs of cold-stress illnesses and what to do to help themselves or their co-workers. If medical care is not available, workers should begin warming the person, as follows:

- Get the victim into a warm room or shelter.
- Remove any wet clothing.
- Warm the center of the body first—chest, neck, head, and groin—using an electric blanket, if available. They can also use skin-to-skin contact under loose, dry layers of blankets, clothing, towels or sheets.
- Warm beverages can help increase body temperature, but do not give alcoholic beverages or try to give alcoholic beverages to an unconscious person.
- After the body temperature has increased, keep the victim dry and wrapped in a warm blanket, including the head and neck.
- Get medical attention as soon as possible.

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Slips, Trips and Falls

Workers also face slipping hazards during wintertime. Wet and icy patches outside can cause slips, trips and falls. The Bureau of Labor Statistics, The Economics Daily report found slips, trips and falls accounted for 290,660 work injuries.

All businesses and organizations should clear walking surfaces quickly and frequently, and spread a deicer or traction improver, such as cat litter, to reduce slick spots. Reroute people around pools of water or ice until those areas can be mopped up or de-iced.

Snow, ice and slush can also impact indoor environments. Snowy boots and muddy shoes can track water, slush and ice on floors and create slippery surfaces inside, especially on marble or tile floors. Water or condensation should be wiped up promptly. But until cleaned up, business and organization leaders should alert people to potential slip, trip or fall hazards by placing “wet surface” warning signs or safety cones in affected areas. Managers should designate an area for workers and customers to stow boots or umbrellas near the office entrance to help contain any water-based messes. Place walk-off mats at each entrance to help remove moisture and debris from footwear.

In addition to proper warm clothing, workers should wear slip-resistant footwear in winter conditions; take deliberate, slow and small steps on questionable ground and avoid carrying loads that could offset balance. Wearing sunglasses can help vision by decreasing winter glare.

Ice and Snow Hazards

Indoor and outdoor worksites can both be hampered by hazardous areas where snow or ice impede entries and exits. Clearing snow can be a dangerous task, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) cautions. Plan in advance of a winter event for how your business will handle snow and ice removal. Shoveling snow can be strenuous and exhausting, and can put workers at risk for back injuries, dehydration or, in extreme cases, a heart attack. Workers should be trained to push snow with a shovel instead of lifting it. Colder weather also adds extra stress to the body, so workers should be encouraged to take frequent breaks and warm up properly.

If workers use power tools, like snow blowers, the equipment should be in good working order and employees must be properly trained on the safe operation of each piece of equipment they are called upon to operate. Do not assume that an employee already knows how to use these potentially dangerous tools. Hazards can include worn electrical cables, clearing jams and obstructions and refueling. Always refer to the operator’s manual for each piece of equipment.

Workers performing snow-removal on roofs are also sometimes in harm’s way. OSHA’s “Hazard Alert” commonly reports injuries and deaths related to falling off roof edges, falling through skylights and falling from ladders or sky lifts. Businesses and Organizations should train workers on the right type of equipment, such as ladders or aerial lifts, they will need to get the job done successfully and safely. They should also provide the right personal protective equipment, such as personal fall arrest systems and non-slip safety boots, for the job.

Businesses and organizations are encouraged to use snow-removal methods that do not involve workers going on roofs, if possible. This includes snow rakes and dragging lines from the ground or applying de-icing materials.

If workers use vehicles as part of their job, OSHA recommends they be trained to inspect vehicle systems before winter to make sure everything is working properly, especially the cooling system. This includes confirming a mixture of 50/50 antifreeze and water is in the cooling system at the proper level to avoid freezing. Also check the battery, windshield wipers and tire treads to see if they are in good working order.

Additionally, workers should never be asked to do jobs for which they have received no training or that are not part of their job descriptions. This is especially important when it comes to operating machinery and equipment. It is better to call in a trained professional for challenging tasks rather than risk injury by asking an untrained worker to do them.

Fostering a safe and comfortable work environment requires commitment every day of the year, but especially when winter weather is a factor. By implementing the tips above, both before and during winter’s arrival, small business owners can ensure their employees are safe when temperatures plunge and can safeguard themselves from potential losses. _____

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