

Working Safely During Cold Weather

With the cold weather upon us, it's important to be mindful of the risks associated with the weather. Although there is no specific regulation that addresses the protection of workers from environmental cold, the end result could be very costly. Direct cold related injuries can be easily prevented and save you money. Hypothermia, frostbite, immersion foot and chilblain are a few examples of direct cold related problems.

Hypothermia, for example, has a very high fatality rate. This occurs when the body's internal temperature drops below 95°F. Hypothermia is a huge threat in frigid weather but can also strike during moderate temperatures.

Frostbite occurs when skin, muscle, blood vessels and nerves freeze and form ice crystals. Blood vessels become blocked with tissue debris that causes more damage. Frostbite is often irreversible and amputation is sometimes required. If the injured site heals, the victim may suffer chronic pain or numbness, excessive sweating, abnormal skin color and joint pain. This would require long term care and can cost you a lot of money.

Immersion foot can occur during wet or muddy conditions just above freezing. If any part of the body is covered with the water or mud, it could become chronically swollen, weak and sensitive to the cold. Again, this can require long term treatment and continue to be costly to the employer.

Chilblain is another skin condition that can occur after cold exposure. The symptoms usually appear on the hands and can include red, swollen skin that feels hot, tender and itchy.

Taking precautions during winter months can prevent cold related injuries. Train your employees on proper clothing attire and require the use of hand, foot, head, and face protection in three layers. The middle layer will serve as an insulator. You should also keep track of the temperature and air movement and when possible, provide warming shelters for your employees.