

COLD STRESS

Workers who are exposed to extreme cold or work in cold environments may be at risk of cold stress. Extreme cold weather is a dangerous situation that can bring on health emergencies in susceptible people, such as those without shelter, outdoor workers, and those who work in an area that is poorly insulated or without heat. What constitutes cold stress and its effects can vary across different areas of the country. In regions relatively unaccustomed to winter weather, near freezing temperatures are considered factors for "cold stress." Whenever temperatures drop decidedly below normal and as wind speed increases, heat can more rapidly leave your body. These weather-related conditions may lead to serious health problems.

Types of Cold Stress

Hypothermia

When exposed to cold temperatures, your body begins to lose heat faster than it can be produced. Prolonged exposure to cold will eventually use up your body's stored energy. The result is hypothermia, or abnormally low body temperature. A body temperature that is too low affects the brain, making the victim unable to think clearly or move well. This makes hypothermia particularly dangerous because a person may not know it is happening and will not be able to do anything about it.

Early Symptoms

- Shivering
- Fatigue
- Loss of coordination
- Confusion and disorientation

Late Symptoms

- No shivering
- Blue skin
- Dilated pupils
- Slowed pulse and breathing

Frostbite

Frostbite is an injury to the body that is caused by freezing. Frostbite causes a loss of feeling and color in the affected areas. It most often affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers, or toes. Frostbite can permanently damage body tissues, and severe cases can lead to amputation. In extremely cold temperatures, the risk of frostbite is increased in workers with reduced blood circulation and among workers who are not dressed properly.

Symptoms of frostbite include:

- Reduced blood flow to hands and feet (fingers or toes can freeze)
- Numbness
- Tingling or stinging
- Aching
- Bluish or pail, waxy skin

Recommendations for Workers

Workers should avoid exposure to extremely cold temperatures when possible. When cold environments or temperatures can not be avoided, workers should follow these recommendations to protect themselves from cold stress:

- Wear appropriate clothing.
- Make sure to protect the ears, face, hands and feet in extremely cold weather.
- Move into warm locations during work breaks; limit the amount of time outside on extremely cold days.
- Avoid touching cold metal surfaces with bare skin.
- Monitor your physical condition and that of your coworkers.

