

TOOLBOX TALK #47

OVERLOOKED WINTERTIME HAZARDS – PART 1

Outdoor workers need to be protected in every season. When people are on the job during winter months, safety plans need to go beyond preventing hypothermia. That's because cold weather also raises the risk of some not-so-obvious hazards. Here are a few.



The Risk of Dehydration

It's not just a warm weather issue. When we exhale, our bodies lose fluids. And dryer, less-humid air – common during winter – can exacerbate that fluid loss. This increases the risk of dehydration, which can lead to illness and injury. In addition, dry skin that often happens during cold weather makes it harder to retain water. The cold also tends to diminish thirst, resulting in less of an impulse to drink than when it's warm. All of these factors combined can lead people to be chronically dehydrated during the long winter months. To help keep workers hydrated, OSHA recommends that employers:

- Educate workers on the importance of hydration and what to avoid
- Equip all work areas with accessible and visible cool water (less than 60°F)
- Designate a relief person so workers can take a water break, or have water brought directly to the worker who can't leave their work area
- Encourage workers to keep a sealable bottle of cool water in their work area so they can hydrate

The Effects of UV Rays

Likewise, sunburn and other sun-related issues can happen in the winter. Ultraviolet rays from the sun are harmful even during cold-weather months. Plus, snow on the ground is a significant factor in UV exposure because it can reflect up to 80% of those rays. Workers can protect themselves by covering up (which they're probably already doing) and wearing a wide-brimmed hat. Also, using a broad-spectrum sunscreen with a sun-protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher each day. Apply the sunscreen every 2 hours, and don't forget to use it on often-neglected places such as the ears, neck and hands. Consider using a moisturizing sunscreen with ingredients like lanolin or glycerin to combat dry winter skin.

Sun-reflected UV rays on snow can also cause corneal sunburn, sometimes called snow-blindness. Wearing safety eyewear equipped with UV protection or sunglasses can help prevent this painful condition, as well as guard against dry eyes. In windy weather, sunglasses can actually trap in some moisture, holding the moisture in and block out cold, dry air. The winter months can be uncomfortable for many people, but wearing the proper eye protection and paying attention to humidity levels can help relieve those symptoms.