

TOOLBOX TALK #52

KEEP THE COLD OUT

Working in the cold weather can put workers at risk of cold stress injuries. That's why planning and preparation are key. Everyone on the site needs to be aware of the signs of cold stress. Get the word out to workers in multiple ways:

- Information during new employee orientation
- Ongoing training for current workers
- Stand-downs (taking place at the same time) at all jobsites

During training, go over the four major types of cold stress injuries: hypothermia, frostbite, trench foot and chilblains. These can result from prolonged exposure to cold, wet conditions. Here's a look at each condition, along with first aid tips:



Frostbite is most common on fingers, toes, ears, cheeks and the nose. It's caused by freezing of the skin and underlying tissue. Symptoms include numbness, tingling, pain and skin that is cold, hard and appears waxy. Workers experiencing frostbite should be taken to a warm place as soon as possible. Co-workers should alert medical personnel. Unless necessary, a person with frostbitten toes or feet shouldn't walk. Other tips include:

- Remove any clothing or accessories that might hinder circulation. (If clothing is wet, wait until you're indoors.)
- Use a loose, dry cloth to protect the frostbitten area until medical help arrives.
- Don't rub the affected areas – you could damage the skin or break blisters.
- Don't warm the frostbitten areas with direct heat, as this can cause burns.

For mild frostbite, rewarm the affected area with water (99° to 108°F) for 15-30 minutes.

Trench foot (also known as immersion foot syndrome) can occur after prolonged exposure to cold temps and moisture. Symptoms include redness of the skin (depending on the severity of the condition and the person's skin color), swelling, leg cramps, blisters/ulcers, numbness and bleeding under the skin. If experiencing symptoms of trench foot, remove footwear and wet socks, dry the feet, and avoid walking, which can further damage tissue.

Chilblains are caused when exposure to the cold damages capillaries in the skin. Symptoms may include redness (again, depending on the severity of the condition and the person's skin color), inflammation, itching and blisters. Affected workers should slowly rewarm their skin and avoid scratching it. Corticosteroid cream can relieve swelling and itching. Check for blisters or ulcers, then clean and cover any you find.

Hypothermia sets in when the body's core temperature drops below 95°F. It can bring on uncontrollable shivering, slurred speech, confusion/disorientation and fatigue. Call emergency medical services right away if a worker is displaying symptoms. Then move to a warm, dry shelter and have the person remove all wet clothing. Avoid trying to warm worker's arms and legs if they're experiencing hypothermia, as it can add stress to the heart and lungs. Don't rewarm a hypothermia victim too quickly, such as with a heating lamp or hot bath, as the person may go into shock or heart failure.