



Cold Weather in the Workplace

Tis' the season to not be freezin'

Cold weather is a potentially dangerous situation that can affect those who work outdoors or work in areas that are poorly insulated or without heat. When exposed to increased wind speeds and extreme cold temperatures, heat can leave the body more quickly, leading to a variety of cold stress conditions.

A cold work environment forces the body to work harder to maintain its core temperature of 98.6 degrees F. Cold stress occurs from a drop in skin temperature and eventually internal body temperature which can lead to frostbite, hypothermia, and trench foot. Common risk factors include dressing improperly, poor physical/health conditions, and exhaustion. Below are a few reminders to protect yourself from cold weather conditions:

Wind chill

The temperature your body feels when air temperature and wind speed are combined is wind chill. It is important to understand the effect wind has when paired with cold temperatures as it can be life threatening. For example, when the air temperature is 40 degrees F, and the wind speed is 35mph, the wind chill temperature is 28 degrees F. This measurement is the actual effect of the environmental cold on the exposed skin.

How cold is too cold?

The American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) has developed a [Work/Warm-up Schedule](#) to provide recommendations to workers on cold exposure limits. The schedule takes both air temperature and wind speed into account. For example, when the air temperature is -15 to -19 degrees F, and the wind speed is 10 mph, the maximum work period is 75 minutes with (2) 10 minute work breaks in a warm location.

Tips for Success When Talking to Your Team

Preparation is Key: Be aware of cold weather advisory days and plan work accordingly. Communicate where drinking fountains and warm areas are located for use during breaks.

Stay Positive: Keep the focus on what can be done to create a safe work place, instead of focusing on what has gone wrong in the past.

Share a Story, Ask for a Story: Storytelling is a powerful method to convey information. Stories from your employees make the topic even more relatable.

Slippery surfaces

Here at Northwestern, there have been 11 injuries in the past 5 years involving slips and falls on ice, sleet, or snow. These injuries resulted in 15 lost days, 79 restricted days, and \$55,191.70 in costs to the university. To prevent slips and falls on slippery surfaces, wear proper footwear, plan ahead, and walk carefully by taking short steps and walking at a slow pace.

Report falls on the Risk Management [website](#) or call 847.491.5582

Stay warm. Stay informed.

- Make checking the forecast part of your regular routine so you'll know when to expect cold weather.
- Wear several layers of clothing and cover exposed skin, even if you don't think you'll be outdoors much.
- Adjust your schedule to avoid being outside during the coldest part of the day.
- Take frequent breaks in warm, dry areas to allow your body to warm up.
- Avoid alcoholic drinks, and stay hydrated by drinking lots of water and warm beverages.
- Monitor yourself and your coworkers. Look out for signs of cold stress such as shivering and difficulty speaking.

Learn more: For additional information, please review [OSHA's Winter Weather Guidelines](#).

Safety at Home – Key to a Happy Winter!

With the cold winter months beginning, consider these safety tips to protect you and your family:

- ✓ Check your furnace and fireplace chimney to ensure they're operating as they should.
- ✓ Clear and salt snowy and icy surfaces to avoid slips and falls.
- ✓ Frequently check on loved ones to ensure their homes are adequately heated.
- ✓ If you have pets, make sure they have plenty of food and water, and are not overly exposed to extreme cold.

For Additional Information

Contact Gwen Butler, Director, Environmental Health & Safety, at 847.491.4936

Do you or your team have a safety story you'd like to share? Contact Risk Management at gwen.butler@northwestern.edu for details.