

Cold Weather Hazards

Working outdoors during the winter in the Pacific Northwest exposes you to freezing temperatures, cold winds, rain, ice and snow. All these weather conditions can put you at risk for severe hazards including cold-related illnesses such as frostbite and hypothermia. But if you are aware of the hazards and prepare for the weather, you can stay safe throughout the cold months.

Frostbite

Frostbite is an injury caused when the skin freezes and ice crystals form in the cells. Severe cases can lead to amputation. Symptoms of frostbite include the following:

- skin that feels painful, prickly, itchy, numb, or very cold or very hot
- skin that looks abnormally red, white, pale, grayish-yellow, or even waxy
- blisters
- general clumsiness

If you notice symptoms, warm up and get checked by a doctor.

Hypothermia

Hypothermia is a medical emergency. Hypothermia occurs when your body loses heat faster than it can produce heat. The result is an abnormally low body temperature. Symptoms of hypothermia include the following:

- shivering
- clumsiness
- slurred speech or mumbling
- confusion
- drowsiness

Use the buddy system instead of working alone so that you and your buddy can both watch for symptoms of hypothermia.

If you suspect hypothermia, call 911 immediately. Be sure you have appropriate clothing for wet, cold and windy conditions. Wear layers of clothing so you can adjust when the temperature changes. Do your best to stay dry. Wear a waterproof outer layer—wet clothing will chill your body very quickly. If you do get wet, change your clothing immediately. Your nose, hands, cheeks, and ears are usually most at risk for frostbite. Keep them covered and protected. Wear an insulating liner under your hard hat. Take frequent breaks in a dry, warm area to allow your body to warm up throughout the day. When possible, schedule work for the warmest part of the day.

If you notice symptoms of cold-related illnesses and injuries, be sure to get warm and get medical treatment. Eating warm food and drinking hot drinks can help you stay warmer throughout the day. Coffee is always a favorite, but don't drink too much. The caffeine in the coffee reduces blood flow to your extremities which can increase the possibility of frostbite. Although alcohol has a lower freezing point than water, it increases heat loss in people and makes you colder faster; avoid alcohol anytime you must be out in the cold.

Heavy exertion in cold weather can cause the blood vessels in your heart to constrict. This puts more strain on your heart and can cause a heart attack. Pay attention to your body—you should know when you're overdoing it. Keep a steady, even pace and don't overexert yourself. Remember that your body is already working hard just to stay warm.

