

# Protecting Outdoor Workers When Winter Sets In

**A**LTHOUGH MOST of California won't be experiencing sub-zero temperatures this winter it can get cold in some regions of the state, affecting people who work outdoors, particularly in higher elevations, the Valley and in the Bay Area.

Occupations that are most at risk include construction, yard, agricultural and infrastructure workers. But anyone that has to spend a long amount of time outside in the winter can be affected.

Prolonged exposure to freezing or cold temperatures can result in serious maladies, including trench foot, frostbite, hypothermia, and in the worst-case scenario, death.

The kind of conditions that cause cold-related ailments, aside from low temperatures, are high and/or cool winds, dampness and cold water.

Even though temperatures may be above freezing, if it's a windy day, you have to take the wind-chill factor into consideration.

## Safeguarding your workers

Fed-OSHA has published the "Cold Stress Guide" with tips on handling cold weather:

- Learn the signs and symptoms of cold-induced illnesses/injuries and what to do to help workers.
- Encourage workers to wear proper clothing for cold, wet and windy conditions, including layers, so they can adjust to changing conditions.
- Workers should take frequent short breaks in warm, dry shelters.
- Try to schedule work for the warmest part of the day.
- Tell your workers to not work to the point of exhaustion, as it can make them more susceptible to hypothermia.
- Work in pairs.
- Workers should eat warm, high-calorie foods such as hot pasta dishes for breakfast and lunch.

## When hypothermia sets in

The most common risk in California winters is hypothermia, which occurs when body temperature falls to a level where normal muscular and cerebral functions are impaired.

## HYPOTHERMIA SIGNS

- Shivering uncontrollably,
- Slurred speech,
- Clumsy movements, and
- Fatigue and confused behavior.

If a worker displays signs of hypothermia:

- Call for emergency help.
- Move them to a warm, dry area. Remove wet clothing and replace with warm, dry clothing or provide blankets.
- Have the person drink warm, sweet drinks if they are alert. Avoid drinks with caffeine or alcohol.
- Have them move their arms and legs to create muscle heat. If they are unable to do this, place warm bottles or hot packs in the armpit, groin, neck and head areas.

If a person is in danger of getting hypothermia from water exposure:

- Call for emergency help,
- If you don't have fresh clothes and a warm place to change, do not remove any clothing. Button, buckle, zip and tighten any collars, cuffs, shoes and hoods because the layer of trapped water closest to the body provides a layer of insulation that slows the loss of heat.

## The takeaway

Even if your staff don't work in sub-zero conditions, they can still develop hypothermia while working outdoors. Cal/OSHA requires employers to provide a safe work environment.

Protecting them against the elements and having a plan in place in case someone shows signs of hypothermia or frostbite should be your top priority. ❖

