5-minute safety talk

Give **Cold Weather PPE** a Warm Welcome

While they cannot control Mother Nature, supervisors do play an important role in helping protect workers from cold-weather dangers including frostbite and hypothermia.

Cold-weather management

Workers have learned from experience not to touch cold metal with unprotected skin or stay outside too long in extreme cold. But supervisors still must review cold-weather safety procedures with their crews from time to time. This is especially important at the beginning of the cold-weather season and when workers are distracted or preoccupied for some reason. Many times workers are alone or in isolated areas so good safety training is especially important. Often workers put themselves in danger when they forget about the cold because they are concentrating on their job. If supervisors remind them about the cold, they are more likely to think about it and take appropriate action.

Outfit yourself for the elements

In the United States, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration requirements for cold-weather gear are only general. The personal protective equipment standard for general industry describes employers' obligation to provide protection for virtually all occupational hazards including temperature extremes. However, the employer is not required to pay for equipment that workers can use off the job such as outerwear and boots. This means that a supervisor can only provide guidance. They cannot order a worker to wear particular PPE in the cold unless the company is providing it to the employees.

Brave the elements safely

When workers have to venture outside, making sure they wear good protective clothing is the best way to help guarantee their safety.

- As most cold climate dwellers already know, one of the secrets to winter warmth is layering. Thermal long underwear provides a snug-fitting layer against the skin and wicks perspiration away from it.

  Insulated bib overalls are popular with many outdoor workers. They usually have a polyester, cotton and acrylic blend shell over quilted polyfill or Thinsulate® insulation. Some garments warm different parts of the body and have special compartments for small heat packets. Duck canvas coveralls, flannel work shirts and down vests also are common for outdoor workers.

  For outerwear, wind and moisture resistance are essential for workers' comfort. Jackets made with a Gore-Tex® shell work well, but can be expensive. Other similar materials on the market do the job equally well and cost less.

- For feet, wool or wool blend socks are better for warmth than cotton, and they keep your feet drier. For particularly cold conditions, put the wool socks over a lightweight fabric such as polypropylene.

  Heavy-duty insulated boots are a good bet for the cold. Some are reinforced with steel toes for work use, and many styles contain felt liners that you can pull out to dry. Avoid tight fitting boots. They can restrict blood circulation and limit the amount of trapped air necessary for insulation. Waterproof boots can help prevent frostbite in wet conditions. However, in cold, dry conditions they can trap perspiration and increase the chance of injury.

  Remember to look for a sole that will protect you from falls on snow and ice.

- Hands need as much protection as feet, even though the protection must occasionally come off during the course of the work.

  Insulated leather work gloves are both sturdy and warm. Some workers, such as electrical linemen, choose "first-finger mitts" in which the index finger and thumb have their own openings but the remaining fingers are grouped together for warmth.

- The bitter cold on a worker's face and neck can be a little distraction or a big safety problem. For neckwear, choose chokers rather than scarves. Scarves can become entangled in equipment. A balaclava or partial face covering can keep sensitive noses and cheeks warm. Specially designed wind guards and face masks also can be used for protection when exposed to the extreme cold.

- Finally, don't forget the hat. More body heat escapes through the head than from anywhere else on the body. A hat that covers the ears — or a combination of hat and headband — will help keep workers warm and comfortable. Wool or synthetic materials such as Polarfleece will do. Some workers wear a hood over their hat. Others insert a hard-hat liner to trap body heat.

It is not easy to convince workers that bundling up will actually help them perform better in the cold, but hopefully the above tips will help to increase their awareness and help them stay warm.

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