

**COLD WEATHER****TALKING POINTS****Dealing with Winter Hazards**

Cold weather brings many risks and hazards. Common ones include slips and falls, exposure to extreme temperatures, overexertion when removing snow, carbon monoxide poisoning and hazardous winter driving conditions. It is important to address each hazard properly and not wait until an injury-causing (or life-threatening) condition is present.

**Keep It Dry!**

The most common hazards, and injuries, involve slipping and falling. They occur more often in wet weather when residual snow and ice keep floor surfaces wet. Easy and common-sense measures can prevent many of them.

Be sure to take the proper cold-weather precautions. Start with entrances and exits. Are doors, stairs, and walking surfaces in good condition? Address snow, water or ice instead of waiting for an accident to happen.

Be sure to clean and mop floors continually or place non-slip absorbent mats at entrances. This is especially important in high traffic areas where people track in snow, water and mud on their shoes. These include retail store locations, building lobbies and similar locations. A good slip and fall prevention program asks the following questions:

- Is snow, ice or rainwater removed promptly?
- Is lighting adequate in all work areas, halls and stairways?
- Do employees wear appropriate footwear?
- Do area rugs or mats have non-slip backings?
- Do highly-polished floors become slippery when wet?
- Are there any “wet floor” warning signs?
- Does maintenance staff use proper cleaning, stripping and finishing products on floors?

**Exposure to Weather**

Frostbite and hypothermia are the major exposure risks in cold weather. With frostbite, freezing occurs in the deep layers of skin and tissue. Skin becomes pale, and waxy-white, hard and numb. Frostbite usually affects the fingers, hands, toes, feet, ears and nose.

Hypothermia is more serious and is a medical emergency. Signs of hypothermia include: body temperature reaching 95°F, fatigue or drowsiness, uncontrolled shivering, bluish skin, and slurred speech. When hypothermia or frostbite is present, get medical help right away.

For answers to general safety questions, call our hotline at 212-587-5500 to speak to a NYSIF risk control consultant Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., or send us an email at [RiskControl@nysif.com](mailto:RiskControl@nysif.com).

## **Protecting Outdoor Workers**

- Staff should be trained to recognize the environmental and workplace conditions that lead to potential cold-induced illnesses and injuries. Training should include how to protect against these conditions
- Training should include the selection of proper clothing for cold, wet and windy conditions. The importance of layering clothing to adjust to changing temperatures should be covered as well as the need to wear a hat and gloves.
- Remind staff to take frequent short breaks to allow the body to warm up.
- Have staff perform work during the warmest part of the day. Wind chill must be considered when gauging temperature.
- Use the buddy system (work in pairs) to help workers keep track of each other.
- Advise your staff to drink warm beverages and avoid drinks with caffeine or alcohol.

## **Overexertion**

It's easy to overdo outdoor chores in cold weather. Overexertion can be caused when performing strenuous tasks in cold weather, such as shoveling snow. Overexertion leads to sore muscles, back strain and possible heart attacks.

Consider the physical condition of anyone doing stressful outdoor work before assigning them. Diabetics, heart patients and persons with vascular and thyroid problems are more susceptible to cold-weather stress.

- When possible, use mechanical or motorized equipment to minimize demanding tasks such as shoveling snow.
- Use hand shovels with ergonomic handles.
- Staff must be trained to be aware of, and follow all, safety guidelines and procedures when clearing or un-jamming powered snow removal equipment.
- Make sure workers know how to perform assigned tasks safely, and use the proper tools (i.e. thermally insulated tool handles are helpful in sub-freezing temperatures).
- Employees should know the symptoms of cold-related stress, and monitor each other.

## **Carbon Monoxide**

Carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning most often occurs in the winter months. CO is found in many businesses and you can be exposed to it by industrial and chemical processes where there is a lack proper ventilation. The chief cause of exposure is exhaust from combustion

engines. Propane-powered forklifts, and cars and trucks idling in unvented areas are typical causes. Proper ventilation and exhaust systems must be provided in such locations.

Unvented heating appliances and outdoor exposure from improperly exhausted equipment have also caused CO poisoning. Construction workers can be exposed from onsite heaters, as well as vehicles. All portable heaters should be operated with appropriate ventilation and according to manufacturer's specifications.

Gasoline-fueled electrical generators, diesel-powered equipment and similar machines can sicken workers. To avoid CO poisoning, generators should be placed outside and away from windows or air intakes.

Symptoms of exposure include headache, fatigue, lightheadedness, shortness of breath, nausea and dizziness. High concentrations cause unconsciousness, coma and death. Concentration, length of exposure and rate of breathing determine the amount of poisoning. Workers with possible CO exposure who show these symptoms should move to areas with fresh air, and get medical help if needed.

Fifty parts per million is the permissible OSHA 8-hour time-weighted average for CO; the NIOSH recommended exposure level is 35 ppm. If exposure is a possibility, air quality tests should be performed.

## **Driving**

Another major cold-weather hazard is driving in bad weather. You must pay constant attention to changing conditions. Year round, many factors cause vehicular accidents, including road conditions, weather and failure to follow basic safe driving rules. Winter drivers also encounter hazards unique to the season, including treacherous "black ice" that cannot easily be detected until it's too late. It is especially common for icy patches to form on bridges and in the shade. These additional tips can help with winter driving:

- Winterize vehicles. Check batteries, tires, windshield wipers, washer fluid and antifreeze. Keep cell phones charged.
- Drivers should stay below posted speed limits in bad weather and keep a safe distance from the next vehicle.
- Be ready to reduce speed in case of sudden stops.
- Keep your lights on. Make sure other vehicles can see you.

Use safe braking techniques to avoid skidding. Ease off the accelerator. If your vehicle has antilock brakes (ABS), brake firmly and steer. Without ABS, pump the brakes to avoid wheel lock-up. Always gently steer into a skid to regain control of the vehicle.