

Protecting Yourself from Cold Stress

Now that the winter has arrived, and the incidence of exposure to cold temperatures has increased, it is important to protect yourself from cold stress. Those who are exposed to extreme cold or work in cold environments may be at risk of cold stress.

Extremely cold or wet weather can be a potentially dangerous situation that can cause occupational illness and injuries such as hypothermia, frostbite (an injury to the body that is caused by freezing, which most often affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers or toes), trench foot (an injury of the feet resulting from prolonged exposure to wet and cold conditions that can occur if feet are constantly wet), and chilblains (ulcers formed by damaged small blood vessels in the skin caused by repeated exposure of skin to temperatures just above freezing to as high as 60 degrees.

Hypothermia- a condition in which the body uses up its stored energy and can no longer produce heat.

Early symptoms of hypothermia are:

Shivering, fatigue, loss of coordination, confusion and disorientation

Late symptoms of hypothermia are:

No shivering, blue discoloration of the skin, dilated pupils, slow pulse and breathing, loss of consciousness

First Aid for Hypothermia:

Request immediate medical assistance, move victim into a warm room or shelter, remove wet clothing, warm the center of the body first- chest, neck, head and groin- using an electric blanket, or use skin to skin contact under loose, dry layers of blankets, clothing or towels.

If conscious, warm beverages may help increase the body temperature. Do not give alcohol.

Once body temperature has increased keep them dry and wrapped in a warm blanket, including the head and neck.

Symptoms of Frostbite:

Reduced blood flow to the hands and feet, numbness, aching, tingling or stinging, bluish or pale, waxy skin

First Aid for Frostbite:

Get into a warm room as soon as possible.

Unless necessary, do not walk on frostbitten feet or toes

Immerse the affected area in warm (not hot) water, or warm the affected area using body heat. Do not use a heating pad, fireplace or radiator for warming

Do not massage the frostbitten area; doing so may cause more damage.

Seek medical attention.

First Aid for Trench foot

Remove shoes/boots and wet socks

Dry feet

Avoid walking on feet, as this may cause tissue damage

Seek medical attention.

First Aid for Chilblains

Avoid scratching affected areas

Slowly warm the skin

Keep blisters and ulcers clean and covered.

Seek medical attention.

Protect Yourself

Monitor your physical condition and that of those around you.

Wear Appropriate clothing- wear several layers of loose clothing for insulation, as tight clothing reduces blood circulation to the extremities.

Protect the ears, face, hands and feet in extremely cold or wet weather- boots should be water proof and insulated. Wear a hat to reduce the loss of body heat from your head.

Move into a warm location and limit the time outside.

Carry extra socks, gloves, hats, jacket, blankets, and a change of clothes and a thermos of hot liquid if you plan to be exposed to the cold and or wet weather for a prolonged period of time.

Avoid touching cold metal surfaces with bare skin.

The winter can be a wonderful time of the year, filled with outdoor activities, but it is important to be mindful of what extended exposure to the cold temperatures and or rain can do to the skin. Have fun, but be safe.