

STEPS TO PREVENT HYPOTHERMIA

Employees need to know that working outside in cold conditions can have serious hazards—principally hypothermia and frostbite. Hypothermia is a significant health issue, for three reasons:

It can be difficult to recognize until a case becomes moderate to severe.

It can happen even if temperatures are above freezing.

Unrecognized and untreated, hypothermia can kill.

WHAT IS HYPOTHERMIA?

The human body has its own “thermostat” to regulate its normal temperature of 98.6 degrees F, and it generates heat in response to cold temperatures to maintain this level through such mechanisms as perspiring and shivering. Hypothermia means that the body’s normal temperature has dropped sufficiently to impair physical and mental functions. And it does not take much—body temperature that is only slightly below 98.6 degrees can produce mild hypothermia.

Signs of advancing hypothermia include:

LOSS OF PHYSICAL COORDINATION

SLURRED SPEECH

UNCONTROLLABLE SHIVERING

DAZED CONSCIOUSNESS OR IRRATIONAL BEHAVIOR

HOW CAN YOU PREVENT HYPOTHERMIA?

Employees who work in cold conditions should understand, first, that hypothermia is a real hazard, and second, that there are several commonsense things they can do to protect themselves, including:

- Stay dry—if they get wet, come in and change clothes or dry out.
- Dress in layers—these provide insulation, and outer layers can be removed if the weather gets warmer.
- Wear clothing that resists moisture or “wicks” it away quickly. Synthetic fabrics are best; cotton is not recommended because it retains moisture.
- Work in pairs—if one shows signs of hypothermia, the other can provide assistance.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol—these actually hurt, rather than help, in resisting the cold.
- If they are uncomfortably cold, come inside and warm up!



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