Are Your Workers Prepared for Severe Winter Weather?



If your workers work outdoors or travel on the job, they can be impacted by severe winter weather and exposed to hazards such as being struck by falling icicles and tree limbs or developing frostbite. In fact, according to Environment Canada, in an average year, more Canadians die from exposure to winter cold than from lightning, wind storms and tornadoes combined.

Canada has one of the most severe winter climates of any country in the world. The country experiences a wide variety of dangerous weather conditions including extreme cold, blinding blizzards, and treacherous ice storms. And wind chill can make bad conditions even worse.

So how do you protect your workers from cold stress if they're exposed to winter weather and storms and the related OHS hazards' Take these seven steps to cold weather safety:

1. **Listen to the weather forecast**

Check the Environment Canada weather forecast before going out in the winter for warnings and alerts. Winter weather alerts can be categorized into three basic categories (each of which can occur in combination with another):

Precipitation alerts:

Snowfall ' significant snowfall

Snow Squall ‘ when cold air moves across larger open bodies of water (such as the Great Lakes) creating nearly stationary bands of cloud and snow

Freezing Rain / **Freezing Drizzle** ‘ when rain or drizzle falls onto sub-zero surfaces and freezes on contact forming a layer of ice

Rainfall ‘ significant rainfall

Winter Storm – issued when multiple types of severe winter weather are expected to occur together

Cold alerts:

Extreme Cold ‘ extremely cold temperatures or very low wind chill values

Flash Freeze ‘ issued when a rapid drop in temperature causes water from rain or melted snow on streets, sidewalks etc. to quickly freeze

Poor visibility alerts:

Blizzard ‘ issued when winds are expected to create blowing snow giving widespread reduced visibility of 400 metres or less

Blowing Snow ‘ issued when winds are expected to create blowing snow giving poor visibility of 800 metres or less

2. **Plan ahead**

Have a cold weather policy and safety plan prepared in advance to ensure worker safety when it’s very cold or when the wind chill is significant. For example, schedule warm-up breaks for outside workers.

3. **Dress warmly**

Workers should dress in layers with a wind-resistant outer

layer. When it’s cold, they should also wear a hat, mittens or insulated gloves, and something to keep their faces warm, such as a scarf, neck tube or face mask.

They should also wear warm and waterproof footwear. And when it’s very cold or when the wind chill is significant, they should cover as much exposed skin as possible because extremities, such as the ears, nose, fingers and toes, lose heat the fastest.

4. **Seek shelter**

When the wind chill is significant, workers should get out of the wind and limit the time they spend outside.

5. **Stay dry**

Wet clothing chills the body rapidly. So workers should remove outer layers of clothing or open their coats if they’re sweating.

6. **Keep active**

Walking, running or staying active will help warm workers by generating body heat.

7. **Be aware**

Ensure that workers and supervisors watch for signs of frost nip, frostbite and hypothermia. Note that the use of alcohol, tobacco and certain medications will increase an individual’s susceptibility to cold.

Here are additional resources from the OHS Insider that you can use to protect your workers this winter, including:

- A cold stress infographic to display in the workplace
- Winter driving tips
- A frostbite risk and control chart
- Spot the Safety Violation: Dress Properly to Avoid Cold Stress

- A handout on cold stress
- Cold Stress Checklist
- Cold Work Warm-up Break Schedule.