

Occupational health and safety

Cold stress an often overlooked factor in the workplace

By Lorraine Wakely
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Even in these days of high-tech fibers, remote car starters and climate-controlled environments, we still have to deal with the cold.

Whether playing or working in it, cold weather can be dangerous, and "cold stress" an often overlooked hazard.

So why worry about the cold? We all know about frostbite and hypothermia.

But being in the cold for extended periods of time can also aggravates medical conditions, affects dexterity, mental skills and co-ordination, and increases the risk of injuries such as back strain.

How much we feel the cold varies from person to person.

Factors such as age, weight, fitness level and "being used to it" all come into play.

So do fatigue, some medications and alcohol consumption, and obvious environmental factors, such as temperature, wind and humidity.

Some do's

So what should we be doing to help battle cold stress?

- The first step is dressing appropriately.

- Take advantage of new-age fibers such as polypropylene or stick to the old classics such as wool.

- The secret to staying warm is to wear multiple layers of light, loose fitting clothing. The air between layers helps keeps you warm.

The inner layer should be able to absorb moisture. This helps keep you drier. The middle layer helps trap that insulating air layer.

Fleece and wool are both great. The outer layer should be water-proof.

- We lose 40 per cent of our body heat through an uncovered head. A warm hat is essential.

- Carry an extra pair of socks — and change them when they get moist.

- For very cold weather or long periods working outside, felt-lined,

rubber-bottomed, leather-topped boots with a removable felt insole are the best.

- Wear UV blocking sunglasses, and remember mittens protect fingers better than gloves.

Some don'ts

A few winter clothing don'ts:

- Don't wear dirty or oily clothing. It loses insulation value.

- Don't wear clothes that are too tight. They slow the circulation that keeps you warm.

- Don't drink alcohol. It opens blood vessels, so you lose heat more rapidly.

- Don't drink too much caffeine. It has the same effect as alcohol.

- Don't keep cold weather clothing compressed in storage bags for long periods of time.

- Don't put damp or wet clothing in storage bags.

One of the biggest tips to keeping happy outside is to avoid sweating.

When we start working hard we get warm and start to sweat. Dampened clothing loses its insulating value and can even make you colder.

When you start to get warm in the cold, it's important to avoid sweating.

Removing clothes in the following sequence is best: remove gloves (unless protection is needed from ice and snow), remove headgear and neck wrappings, open jackets at the waist and sleeves (new designs often come with armpit zips to aid air flow), remove outer shell to increase air flow through inner layers.

If you have questions about working in the cold, or any other health and safety issues, contact the Occupational Health Clinic for Ontario Workers, Sudbury office.

Stay dry, keep warm and be safe.

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