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Winter Weather Safety in the Workplace

Slipping on ice. Trees downed in roadways. Hypothermia. Back pain from snow shoveling. The cold weather season presents a wide variety of new exposures for employees. As such, taking time to familiarize yourself with the risks and how to combat them can keep decreasing temperature from increasing injuries.

Cold Stress

Employees working outside for long periods during cold weather can be at risk for cold stress. Susceptibility to cold stress ailments is tied to a number of factors including: air temperature, wind chill, moisture exposure, the individual's existing health conditions and acclimation to cold conditions, and the strenuousness of the activity performed. The injuries and illnesses most often associated with cold stress are hypothermia, frostbite, and trench foot. The best means of preventing these conditions are through thorough training and managing the work environment. All workers should be trained to recognize cold stress illnesses, how to dress appropriately for the weather, proper hydration methods, and first aid treatment. Likewise, employers should provide warm break rooms, heaters, wind shields, and other environmental controls to decrease exposure.

Driving Hazards

For workers who drive for work, cold weather means the potential for slick roads, downed trees and electrical lines, and vehicle malfunctions. All drivers should be trained in winter weather driving techniques and emergency protocols. Vehicles should be properly conditioned and maintained and be supplied with emergency supplies in the event of a breakdown or the driver's inability to continue traveling.

Slips, Trips, and Falls

Even workers who spend limited time outdoors during winter weather, such as walk through the parking lot, are exposed to hazards associated with the conditions. Snow and ice can create slick or obscured pathways, increasing the potential for slips and trips. For those workers that are outside, working surfaces can be compromised. This is especially concerning for employees working at heights, who are at an increase chance of falling. To lessen the risk of these hazards, walkways should be quickly and consistently cleared of snow and ice and treated with deicer. It may be worth suspending outdoor work for the duration of the weather; if work must continue, then appropriate footwear, work surface preparation, and fall protection, where applicable, is a must.

Ergonomics

The act of clearing walkways to prevent slips and trips can create another hazard: strains and sprains. Activities like snow shoveling can result in musculoskeletal injuries, especially if employees use poor lifting techniques, wear inappropriate clothing, or do not properly prepare their body for the task. For example, workers should warm up and stretch their bodies before shoveling. If possible, replace manual shoveling with powered equipment like a snow blower to alleviate stress on employee's bodies.

If you have any questions about preparing your employees for the winter weather, please feel free to reach out to Ward's Loss Prevention Department!

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