

RISK INSIGHTS

EMPLOYER RESPONSIBILITIES IN WINTER WEATHER

Winter weather presents a host of difficulties for employers. Specifically, there are various workplace safety concerns and OSHA requirements to consider. It's essential to be prepared for all scenarios associated with inclement weather before it arrives and ensure that employees are properly informed of all relevant policies and procedures.

An employer's biggest concern should be the safety of their employees. This is especially critical for any job in which employees work outside or are exposed to adverse weather conditions throughout the day.

PREVENTING COLD STRESS

Working in extreme cold can be hazardous for employees, and precipitation and wind exacerbate this danger. OSHA has issued [guidelines](#) offering precautionary measures to prevent cold stress, which can lead to tissue damage, hypothermia, frostbite and trench foot—conditions that can cause serious injury or death.

Factors that contribute to cold stress include frigid temperatures, high velocity air movement, dampness of the air, and contact with cold water or surfaces. Therefore, it's vital to remember that even temperatures of 50 degrees Fahrenheit with sufficient rain and wind can cause cold stress.

If employees must work in cold conditions, employers should train them on the following safety measures:

- + Take periodic breaks to get warm.
- + Drink plenty of liquids to stay hydrated, but avoid caffeine and alcohol.
- + Avoid smoking, which constricts blood flow to the skin.
- + Know and understand symptoms of cold-related injuries and illnesses (e.g., shivering, fatigue, pale or cold skin, confusion, loss of coordination, and numbness or tingling in extremities).
- + Wear protective clothing, including at least three layers, a winter hat, insulated boots and gloves.

MINIMIZING WINTER SLIPS, TRIPS AND FALLS

Snowy and icy conditions can create slippery surfaces during the winter, increasing the likelihood of employees experiencing slip, trip and fall injuries on the job. While some of these injuries can be minor, others can lead to serious bodily trauma. Here are some valuable safety guidelines that employers can share with their workers to help protect against winter slips, trips and falls:

Wear shoes that provide ample traction on snow and ice. Footwear should be made of slip-resistant materials, such as rubber or steel.

- + Exercise extra caution when entering and exiting vehicles. Use them for balance and support.
- + Walk only in areas that have been designated for foot traffic. Keep your eyes on the path ahead to avoid potential hazards.
- + Avoid inclines that are typically difficult to walk up or down, as they may be more treacherous in winter conditions.
- + Take small steps to maintain your center of balance and walk slowly—never run. Despite cold temperatures, keeping your hands out of your pockets can help you stay balanced and break your fall should you slip.
- + Use handrails, walls, or other stationary items to assist you in steadying your feet when needed.
- + Test potentially slippery areas before stepping on them by tapping your foot on the surface first.
- + Dry your shoes on floor mats when entering a building to remove excess moisture.
- + Report any unaddressed slip, trip and fall hazards to your supervisor immediately.

PREPARATION IS KEY

Preparing their workforce and operations for adverse weather conditions can help employers handle winter hazards, ultimately keeping employees safe and reducing related illnesses and injuries.

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