

WORKING IN EXTREME COLD

With heavy rain in Eastern Canada and a holiday season devoid of its usual white carpet, the end of 2023 promised a mild winter. However, as we enter 2024, extreme cold is taking the Prairies and the West by surprise. Unfortunately, climate change is becoming more apparent each year, underscoring the urgent need for strong environmental commitments from governments. All the more so as these realities become increasingly harsh for outdoor workers.

The rest of Canada is unlikely to escape the extreme cold. That is why we must – once again – be even more careful and take the necessary steps to work safely.

TAKE PRECAUTIONS

- Slow down. Your body will not perform at its best in cold temperatures.
- Take your breaks and try to do so out of the cold. Pushing straight through is not the answer.
- Balanced meals and adequate liquid intake are essential for body heat production and the prevention of dehydration. Preferably, drink hot beverages.
- Avoid alcohol, since it causes blood vessels to dilate, which provokes rapid loss of body heat and increases the risk of hypothermia.
- Proper clothing is the best defense against extreme cold. Wear several layers of clothing. This allows body moisture to escape and prevent any outside dampness from getting in.
- Depending on the situation, face covering may be useful. Be sure to replace your mask if it becomes damp or soiled.

PROLONGED EXPOSURE TO EXTREME COLD

Prolonged exposure to extreme cold may produce the following symptoms:

Frostnip (mild frostbite)

Frostnip is a superficial freezing of the skin. There is a burning or tingling sensation, but the skin remains soft to the touch.

- If the skin is warmed up immediately, with a warm hand for example, it will thaw and there will be no damage to the skin or tissues below.

Frostbite

Frostbite is a deeper condition where both the skin and underlying layers (fat, muscle, bones) become frozen. The skin becomes white and numb. This is a serious injury requiring medical attention.

- While waiting for medical attention, bring the victim into a warm location. Avoid rubbing the frostbitten areas.

As long as the wind chill factor does not go beyond -27° C, the risk of frostbite is very low. However, it increases quickly with a wind chill of between -28° and -39° C. When wind chill reaches -40° C or more, frostbite can follow within 10 minutes for most people. At -55° C or more, it can occur in two minutes or less.

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Hypothermia

Hypothermia occurs when body temperature falls below 35° C. Various symptoms may develop: fatigue, dizziness, spasms, bluish skin, confusion, etc.

- When hypothermia occurs, immediate medical attention is necessary. Call an ambulance. Do not leave the victim unattended. Remove any wet clothes and put on warm, dry clothing. Wrap the victim up in warm blankets. Provide hot, slightly sweet beverages, but avoid any caffeinated drinks.

TAKE CARE AND REPORT INCIDENTS

There are no federal regulations on exposure to extreme cold. If you attempt your work and find it to be unsafe, you can exercise your right to refuse unsafe work. How? Inform your supervisor and shop steward that you are invoking your right to refuse under clause 33.13 (Urban Unit), or under the appropriate *Labour Code* provisions for Urban, RSMC and Private Sector Bargaining Unit members.

Report any incident or condition resulting from exposure to extreme cold. Your supervisor should then investigate, with a union representative present.

In solidarity,



Marc Roussel
National Union Representative
Health and Safety

