

Hypothermia Prevention

State Compensation Insurance Fund

During the winter season, working outdoors in cold or wet environments can increase your risk of developing hypothermia. Although, it doesn't take icy temperatures to cause hypothermia, prolonged exposure to temperatures of 30-50 degrees can produce the same effects. Hypothermia doesn't happen immediately. How long it takes to set in depends on the type of exposure and your physical characteristics.

Cold, wind, and water are the major factors of that cause hypothermia as they all draw heat from the body. Additional factors that put you at risk include age, poor physical condition, illness, use of alcohol or certain medicines, and fatigue. The effects of hypothermia can range from mild to severe. In severe cases it can cause permanent damage to your heart and other vital organs and can result in death.

Prevention is the best way to avoid hypothermia, keep the following in mind if you work in conditions that get cold and wet.

- ***Dress Appropriately***, this is the most effective protection against hypothermia. The greatest loss of body heat occurs through the head, so wear a cap and several layers of loose fitting clothing along with boots, or warm socks and shoes.
- ***Keep dry*** when clothing gets wet. It loses 90% percent of its insulating value, so put on rain gear before you get wet, and wool clothing before you start shivering.
- ***Be aware of changes in weather***, stay alert for cold and wind, even a slight breeze carries heat away from the body.
- ***Stop the exposure*** if you are unable to stay warm or dry, leave the cold or wet environment.

The best way to recognize the early warning signs of hypothermia is to look for the “umbles”, which are stumbles, mumbles, fumbles, and grumbles. Look for changes in motor coordination and levels of consciousness, notice if your skin and lips turn blue-gray or if your fingers, ears, and other extremities turn white. Other symptoms to be aware of are uncontrollable shivering, confusion, weakness, drowsiness, pain in your extremities, weak pulse, or shallow breathing. If left untreated, your muscles become rigid, your heartbeat becomes irregular, and you could lose consciousness. Eventual coronary or respiratory failure can result in death. If hypothermia does occur, get to a warm, dry shelter, remove wet clothing (replacing it with warm dry clothing), and keep warm with blankets. Get medical help as soon as possible.

Hypothermia is a life-threatening consequence of inadequate preparation for cold conditions. But it doesn't have to happen to you if you dress properly and watch for early warning signs.