

7 Cold stress

Cold stress or **hypothermia** can affect workers who are not protected against cold. The cold may occur naturally (e.g., from weather conditions) or be created artificially (e.g., from refrigerated environments).

Cold is a physical hazard in many workplaces. When the body is unable to warm itself, serious cold-related illnesses may occur, leading to permanent tissue damage and even death.



Workplaces exposed to cold, wet, and/or windy conditions include:

- Roofs or high buildings open to the wind
- Bridges or other projects near large bodies of water
- Large steel structures that retain cold or are exposed to cold
- Open or unheated cabs
- Refrigerated rooms, vessels, and containers.

This chapter provides information on

- Effects of overexposure to cold
- Factors that can worsen these effects
- Control measures

Knowing this information can help construction workers avoid hypothermia and frostbite.

Core temperature

The body tries to maintain an internal (core) temperature of approximately 37°C (98.6°F). This is done by reducing heat loss and increasing heat production.

Under cold conditions, blood vessels in skin, arms, and legs constrict, decreasing blood flow to extremities. This minimizes cooling of the blood and keeps critical internal organs warm. At very low temperatures, however, reducing blood flow to the extremities can result in lower skin temperature and higher risk of frostbite.

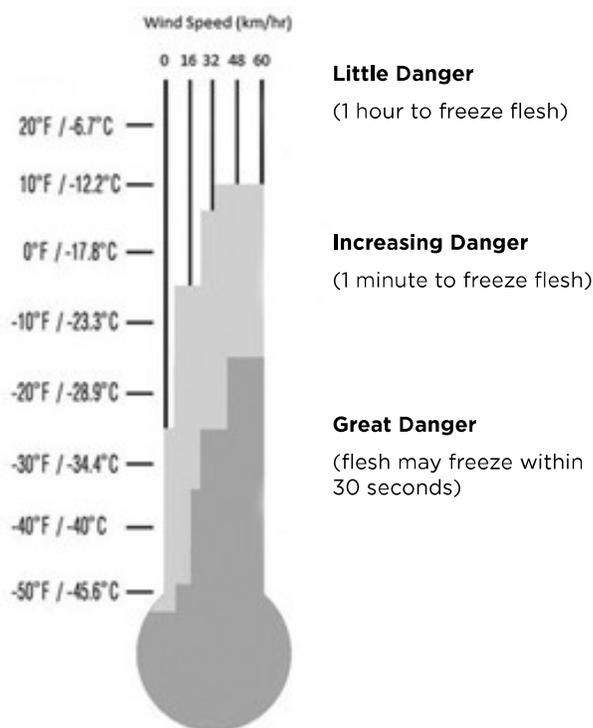
Wind chill

Wind chill involves the combined effect of air temperature and air movement. The wind-chill cooling rate is defined as heat loss (expressed in watts per metre squared) resulting from the effects of air temperature and wind velocity upon exposed skin.

The higher the wind speed and the lower the temperature in the work environment, the greater the insulation value of the protective clothing required.

Figure 7-1 provides equivalents between air temperatures with and without wind. For example, -12.2°C with a wind of 48 km/h is equivalent to -45.27°C with no wind.

Figure 7-1: Equivalent wind chill temperatures



Source: Adapted from TLVs® and BEIs®: Threshold Limit Values® for Chemical Substances and Physical Agents and Biological Exposure Indices®, ACGIH, 2011.

When air speed and temperature produce an equivalent chill temperature of -32°C (-25.6°F), continuous skin exposure should not be permitted. Unprotected skin will freeze only at temperatures below -1°C (30.2°F), regardless of wind speed.

When weather information is not available, the following signs may help to estimate wind speeds in the field:

- 8 km/h (5 mph) light flag just moves
- 16 km/h (10 mph) light flag is fully extended by the wind
- 24 km/h (15 mph) raises a newspaper sheet off the ground
- 32 km/h (20 mph) wind capable of blowing snow

Health hazards

Exposure to cold working conditions can cause two major health problems:

1. Hypothermia
2. Frostbite

Hypothermia

When the body can no longer maintain its core temperature by constricting blood vessels, it shivers to increase heat production. Severe shivering develops when the body temperature has fallen to 35°C (95°F).

Signs and symptoms

The most critical aspect of hypothermia is the body's failure to maintain its deep core temperature. Lower body temperatures present the following signs and symptoms:

- Persistent shivering—usually starts when core temperature reaches 35°C (95°F)
- Irrational or confused behaviour
- Reduced mental alertness
- Poor coordination, with obvious effects on safety
- Reduction in rational decision-making

In addition, acute exertion in cold can constrict blood vessels in the heart. This is particularly important for older workers or workers with coronary disease who may have an increased risk of heart attack.

Mild hypothermia

Early signs of hypothermia include:

- Shivering
- Blue lips and fingers
- Poor coordination

Moderate hypothermia

The next stage includes:

- Mental impairment
- Confusion
- Poor decision-making
- Disorientation
- Inability to take precautions from the cold
- Heart slowdown
- Slow breathing

Severe hypothermia

In severe cases, hypothermia resembles death. Patients must be treated as though they are alive.

Symptoms of severe hypothermia include:

- Unconsciousness
- No shivering
- Heart slowdown to the point where pulse is irregular or difficult to find
- No detectable breathing

First aid

Stop further cooling of the body and provide heat to begin rewarming.

- Carefully remove casualty to shelter. Sudden movement or rough handling can upset heart rhythm.
- Keep casualty awake.
- Remove wet clothing and wrap casualty in warm covers.
- Rewarm neck, chest, abdomen, and groin—but not extremities.
- Apply direct body heat or use safe heating devices.
- Give warm, sweet drinks, but only if casualty is conscious.
- Monitor breathing. Administer artificial respiration if necessary.
- Call for medical help or transport casualty carefully to nearest medical facility.

Frostbite

Frostbite is a common injury caused by exposure to severe cold or by contact with extremely cold objects. It occurs more readily from touching cold metal objects than from exposure to cold air. That's because heat is rapidly transferred from skin to metal.

The body parts most commonly affected by frostbite are face, ears, fingers, and toes. When tissue freezes, blood vessels are damaged. This reduces blood flow and may cause gangrene.

Signs and symptoms

Frostbite symptoms vary. They are not always painful, but often include a sharp, prickling sensation. The first indication of frostbite is skin that looks waxy and feels numb. Once tissues become hard, the case is a severe medical emergency. Severe frostbite results in blistering that usually takes about ten days to subside. Once damaged, tissues will always be more susceptible to frostbite in future.

First aid

- Warm frostbitten area gradually with body heat. Do not rub.
- Do not thaw hands or feet unless medical aid is far away and there is no chance of refreezing. Body parts are better thawed at a hospital.
- Apply sterile dressings to blisters to prevent breaking. Get medical attention.

Risk factors

Certain medical conditions can increase the risk of cold injury:

- Heart disease
- Asthma/bronchitis
- Diabetes
- Vibration/white finger disease

Check with your health practitioner to learn whether medications you are taking may have adverse effects in a cold environment.

Controls

The best protection against cold-related health risks is to be aware and be prepared. Workers should know how to recognize the signs and symptoms of overexposure in themselves and others. Pain in the extremities may be the first warning sign. Any worker shivering severely should come in out of the cold.



Additional controls include the following:

- Workers should understand the wind-chill factor, especially those working on bridges or out in the open on high buildings.
- Workers must be medically fit to work in excessive cold, especially those working on bridges or out in the open on high buildings.
- Workers should understand the importance of high-caloric foods when working in the cold. Warm sweet drinks and soups should be arranged at the worksite to maintain caloric intake and fluid volume. Drinking coffee should be discouraged because it increases water loss and blood flow to extremities.
- Hot drinks and regular breaks should be provided under extremely cold working conditions.
- Those who work in isolated cold environments should have backup, whether indoors or outdoors.

Clothing

Select protective clothing to suit the cold, the job, and the level of physical activity.

- Wear several layers of clothing rather than one thick layer. The air captured between layers is an insulator.
- Wear synthetic fabrics such as polypropylene next to the skin because these wick away sweat. Clothing should not restrict flexibility.
- If conditions are wet as well as cold, ensure that the outer clothing worn is waterproof or at least water-repellent. Wind-resistant fabrics may also be required under some conditions.
- At air temperatures of 2°C (35.6°F) or less, workers whose clothing gets wet for any reason must be immediately given a change of clothing and be treated for hypothermia.
- Tight-fitting hats or hoods can prevent heat loss from the head and protect the ears. However, anything worn under a hard hat must not interfere with the fit or safety features. It must be designed for such use (e.g., a hard hat liner or flat-top beanie) or be recommended by the hard hat manufacturer. Balaclavas or other face coverings may also be necessary under certain weather conditions.
- Tight-fitting footwear restricts blood flow. Footwear should be large enough to allow wearing either one thick or two thin pairs of socks. Wearing too many socks can tighten the fit of footwear and harm rather than help.
- Workers who get hot while working should open their jackets but keep hats and gloves on.

Hand protection

Manual dexterity is essential to safety and production.

- Fine work performed with bare hands for more than 10-20 minutes in an environment below 16°C (60.8°F) requires special measures to keep workers' hands warm. These measures may include warm air jets, radiant heaters (fuel burning or electric), or contact warm plates.
- Metal handles of tools and control bars should be covered by thermal insulating material for temperatures below -1°C (30.2°F).
- Workers should wear gloves where fine manual dexterity is not required and the air temperature falls below 16°C (60.8°F) for sedentary work, 4°C (39.2°F) for light work, and -7°C (19.4°F) for moderate work.



- To prevent contact frostbite, workers should wear insulated gloves when surfaces within reach (especially metallic surfaces) are colder than -7°C (19.4°F). Warn workers to avoid skin contact with these surfaces.
- Tools and machine controls to be used in cold conditions should be designed for operation by gloved hands.

Shelter

- Heated shelters such as trailers should be available nearby. Encourage workers to use these shelters at regular intervals depending on the wind-chill factor.
- Workers entering the shelter should remove their outer layer of clothing and loosen other clothing to let sweat evaporate. In some cases, a change of clothing may be necessary.
- Workers who show signs of shivering, frostbite, fatigue, drowsiness, irritability, or euphoria should immediately return to the shelter.
- For work performed continuously in the cold, allow rest and warm-up breaks (see Table 7-1).

Training

Before working in extreme cold, workers should be instructed in safety and health procedures.

Training should cover the following:

- Proper clothing and equipment
- Safe work practices
- Guidelines for eating and drinking
- Risk factors that increase the health effects of cold exposure
- How to recognize signs and symptoms of frostbite and hypothermia
- Appropriate first aid treatment, including rewarming procedures

Exposure limits

Ontario has no legislated exposure limits for working in cold environments. Table 7-1 indicates Threshold Limit Values (TLVs) for properly clothed personnel working at temperatures below freezing.

Table 7-1: Work/Warm-up schedule for a four-hour shift

Air temperature (sunny sky)		No noticeable wind		8 km/h wind (5 mph)		16km/h wind (10 mph)		24 km/h wind (15 mph)		32 km/h wind (20 mph)	
°C (approx.)	°F (approx.)	Max work period	No. of breaks								
-26 to -28	-15 to -19	Normal breaks	1	Normal breaks	1	75 mins	2	55 mins	3	40 mins	4
-29 to -31	-20 to -24	Normal breaks	1	75 mins	2	55 mins	3	40 mins	4	30 mins	5
-32 to -34	-25 to -29	75 mins	2	55 mins	3	40 mins	4	30 mins	5	Non-emergency work should stop	
-35 to -37	-30 to -34	55 mins	3	40 mins	4	30 mins	5	Non-emergency work should stop			
-38 to -39	-35 to -39	40 mins	4	30 mins	5	Non-emergency work should stop					
-40 to -42	-40 to -44	30 mins	5	Non-emergency work should stop							
-43 and below	-45 and below	Non-emergency work should stop									

Source: Adapted from *Threshold Limit Values (TLV) and Biological Exposure Indices (BEI) booklet (ACGIH: Cincinnati) 2016, page 210.*
Developed by the Saskatchewan Department of Labour

NOTES

- Applies to moderate to heavy physical work in any 4-hour period.
- Warm-up breaks should be in a warm environment for 10 minutes.
- Normal breaks means a break after 2 hours of work.
- Guidelines apply to workers wearing dry clothing.
- If there is limited physical activity, apply the schedule one step lower (more protective).