



Protect yourself from winter hazards

The plunging January temperatures tell us that we're well into winter. We're past that holiday, honeymoon phase. All we're looking forward to now are the remaining months of the cold Ontario winter. For some, winter brings a snow-filled playground. For others, spring can't come fast enough.

Whether or not you enjoy the winter, you need to be aware of the occupational hazards that it brings. Cold, snow, and ice introduce new risks that you likely haven't dealt with since last year and that may not be uppermost in your mind. Here are some of the main winter hazards that employers and workers alike need to be aware of, along with tips for staying safe.

Cold stress

For most of us, frostbite is something from our childhood. But for outdoor workers, it's still a reality. Cold weather can freeze your flesh, causing frostbite and possibly gangrene. The places most prone to frostbite are fingers and toes that are exposed to the cold. Another threat when you're working in freezing temperatures is hypothermia. The symptoms include shivering, blue lips and fingers, slow breathing and heart rate, confusion, and poor coordination. If not treated, hypothermia can result in death.

To prevent frostbite and hypothermia:

- Wear several layers of clothing rather than one thick layer.
- Wear synthetic fabrics close to your skin that "wick" the sweat away.

- Wear warm gloves, hats, and hoods.
- Make sure your boots aren't too tight (you should be able to wear either one thick pair of socks or two thin pairs).
- Change your clothes immediately if they get wet in temperatures below three degrees Celsius.
- Eat and drink warm, high-calorie foods and drinks.

Slips, trips, and falls

Slips, trips, and falls from heights are always a hazard that you must protect yourself against. But during the winter, ice and snow add another dimension to that hazard.

To prevent slips, trips, and falls in winter:

- Wear boots with good treads and gloves that provide a safe grip.
- Put salt or sand on icy work surfaces before starting work.
- Remove snow from walkways frequently and don't allow it to build up.
- Check ladders, vehicles, and other equipment for ice before climbing up onto them.
- Make sure the cold and ice haven't damaged your tools or equipment such as ladders.

Winter driving

Even if you aren't a professional driver, your work likely requires some driving. Whether you drive a transport truck, a dump truck, or a bucket truck, winter weather presents additional hazards that you need to be prepared for.



Stay safe while driving by observing the following precautions:

- Inspect your vehicle to confirm that everything is in good working order, including wipers and washer solution, heaters and defrosters, lights, battery, and radiator antifreeze.
- Make sure your vehicle has suitable tires that provide good traction.
- Start off slowly and keep driving slowly if conditions are poor.
- Remember that you need 3 to 12 times as much distance to stop on ice and snow as on a dry road (and the heavier the vehicle, the greater the stopping distance).
- Remember too that as the temperature rises, ice becomes more slippery because the top layer begins to melt.
- Keep a safe distance behind the vehicle in front of you in case you need to stop suddenly.
- Clear all the snow and ice off your windows, mirrors, and lights.
- Watch out for black ice. (The normal colour of asphalt in cold weather is greyish white. If it's shiny and black, it could be ice.)

Carbon monoxide

With temperatures dipping well below freezing, many workers try to keep themselves warm with gasoline-,

propane-, or diesel-fuelled heaters. They often keep warehouse and garage doors closed to keep the cold out, which also keeps exhaust in. While staying warm may prevent frostbite and hypothermia, the carbon monoxide in the exhaust from heaters, vehicles, and other fuel-burning equipment can be deadly. Carbon monoxide (CO) is a colourless, odourless, and tasteless gas that can poison you. The first signs of poisoning are fatigue and headache, which can be followed by unconsciousness and heart failure.

When using heaters and other fuel-burning equipment (including vehicles) in an enclosed space, take these precautions:

- Whenever possible, use electric heaters or heaters that vent byproducts outdoors to eliminate the risk of CO poisoning.
- Make sure the area is well ventilated by keeping the doors and windows open.
- Check CO levels regularly with a gas detector.
- If possible, use exhaust hoses or fans to draw the exhaust out of the work area.
- Make sure heaters and other fuel-burning equipment are in good condition.

Visit ihsa.ca for more information on these topics, and if you are an employer, go over them with your staff.