

Winter Weather Safety

By Mike Stanzel

The holidays are over. The temperature reads -2 and you're considering looking for a new career in Florida. Then it happens. The dreaded phone call, "There's water bubbling up in the street. We have a water main break." Taking the proper precautions can help you beat Old Man Winter. Proper clothing is essential for protecting against frost bite and hypothermia. First of all, cover your head. Up to 40% of body heat can be lost when the head is exposed. Foot gear should be insulated to protect against cold and dampness. Gloves should be worn at all times. Also, dress in layers and avoid tight, restrictive clothing. Taking frequent breaks in a warm building or truck are necessary.

You need to know the signs of cold related injuries/illness. Frostbite occurs in deep layers of skin and tissues when areas have been exposed to the cold for too long. Generally fingers, toes and ears are most susceptible to frost bite. Skin will become hard and numb and a pale waxy-white color will appear. If this occurs, move to a warm area and remove any wet or tight clothing that may cut off blood flow to affected areas. DO NOT rub affected areas because this causes damage to the skin and tissue. Gently place the affected area in warm water bath and monitor water temperature to slowly warm the tissue. Do not pour warm water directly on the affected area because it will warm the tissue too fast causing tissue damage. Warming should take about 25-40 minutes.

After the affected area has been warmed it may become puffy and blister or have a burning or numb feeling. When normal color and feeling has returned, the area should be dried and wrapped to keep warm. If the area gets cold again do not warm the skin as this will cause severe tissue damage. You should seek medical attention as soon as possible.

Hypothermia is another concern in freezing weather. This occurs when the normal body temperature (98.6) drops below 95. Common signs are fatigue or drowsiness; uncontrolled shivering; cool bluish skin; slurred speech; clumsy movements; irritability, irrational or confused behavior. If this occurs, call for emergency help (e.g. ambulance or 911) and move the person to a warm dry area. Don't leave the person alone. Remove any wet clothing and replace with warm dry clothing or wrap the person in blankets. Have the person move their arms and legs to create muscle heat. If they are unable to do this, place warm bottles or hot packs in the arm pits, groin, neck and head areas. Do not rub the person's body or place them in a warm water bath. This may stop their heart due to increasing the body temperature too quickly. Have the person drink warm sweet drinks, like sugar water or sports type drinks, if they are alert enough.

The key to preventing winter related injuries is safety and knowledge. Taking a few extra steps and being prepared will keep you safe and warm. In the meantime, think spring.