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Promoting Occupational
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Winter Working - Top tips for employers and employees



Winters in the UK and Ireland may seem mild compared to some countries, however, working in very cold temperatures during winter can still have a serious impact on an employee's health, particularly for those with existing health conditions. For example, someone with COPD has a significantly higher risk of ill-health during periods of cold weather.

What the law says

Temperatures in the indoor workplace are covered by the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992, which states that employers should provide a 'reasonable' temperature in the workplace. The approved code of practice suggests the minimum temperature should normally be at least 16 degrees Celsius. If the work involves rigorous physical effort, the temperature should be at least 13 degrees Celsius.

These temperatures are not absolute legal requirements; the employer has a duty to determine what reasonable comfort will be in the particular circumstances.

For example, an office worker who is sitting at a desk for long periods may feel the cold more than someone who is doing physical/manual work.

In this issue

What the law says

What are the dangers of working in cold weather?

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Useful links

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/temperature/thermal/managers.htm>

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pUbns/priced/l24.pdf>

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/temperature/coldstress.htm>



What are the dangers of working in the cold?

The cold can still affect your health, whether you work indoors or outdoors, however, cold weather is much more likely to affect those who work outside. Low temperatures can affect health in the following ways:

Dehydration: This is well known to affect workers in hot temperatures, however this can actually be worse in cold weather. If you are layered up, you are more likely to sweat. In cold conditions, the sweat evaporates quicker, tricking your brain into not realizing you are losing water, leaving you dehydrated. Cold weather also tends to move body fluids to your core, increasing urine output, adding to dehydration.



Raynauds: This can commonly affect the fingers and toes. The cold causes the blood vessels to go into temporary spasm, blocking the flow of blood. This can last minutes or hours, and the sufferer will experience pain, numbness and pins and needles.

Hypothermia: If the body's core temperature drops by 2 degrees, hypothermia develops. This drop in

temperature causes organs to shut down and can prove to be deadly.

Painful joints: Cold weather can cause people to experience aching joints- most commonly affected are knees, hips and ankles.

Heart attacks: During cold weather, blood flow is concentrated more in the core of the body which can put the heart under more strain.

The British Heart Foundation found that the risk of a heart attack or stroke **doubles** when the body is exposed to the cold for a prolonged period.

The risk of slips, trips and falls is also increased when working during the winter months. To reduce this happening, you need to assess the risk and put a system in place to manage it.

Identify the areas most used by pedestrians that is likely to be affected by ice and put a procedure in place to prevent an icy surface forming e.g use grit/salt, consider covering walkways, divert pedestrians to less slippery walkways and barrier off existing ones.

Employers have a responsibility to ensure the safety and wellbeing of employees. In some occupations, working outdoors in winter is unavoidable.

So what can employers do?

Monitor temperature and bring in additional heating if temperature falls below a reasonable level.

Introduce job/task rotation and flexible working patterns so employees are not working in the cold for too long.

Where possible, staff should do outdoor work during the warmest part of the day.

Allow staff to take more breaks in a well heated building & provide access to warm drinks and hot food.

Consider a Health Surveillance program to ensure early detection of ill health caused by working in the cold.



What can employees do:

Remove wet clothing as soon as possible as it can cause accelerated heat loss and impair movement. Carry extra dry clothing if you are likely to get wet during work.

Wear plenty of layers with a waterproof and windproof outer layer, avoiding tight fitting clothing as this reduces blood circulation.

Wear warm, insulated head wear as half of the body's heat can be lost through the head. Warm hand and feet protection is also vital.

Avoid sitting still when working outdoors or in the cold for long periods of time.

Avoid touching cold metal surfaces with bare skin and don't wear metal jewellery outdoors in the cold.

