Toolbox Talk

Cold Weather Safety

Most of what we talk about for construction safety is directly related to the tools, equipment, and materials we work with. The topic of Cold Weather might seem unusual to be a part of safety, but most construction work is done outdoors. And aside from those fortunate enough to live and work in the southern states, the extreme cold effects most of the country for half the year. That being said, "Cold" is going to show up differently across the country, how your body responds to the climate change vs what you are used to is what we need to prepare for.

What could happen?

Hypothermia - A condition in which the body uses up its stored energy and can no longer produce heat. Often occurs after prolonged exposure to cold temperature.

- Early signs: Shivering, fatigue, loss of coordination
- Need Medical Help ASAP: Blue skin, No Shivering, loss of consciousness

Frostbite - An injury to the body that is caused by freezing, which most often affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers, or toes.

- Symptoms: Reduced blood flow to hands/feet, numbness, aching, tingling/stinging
- First-Aid: Move to a warm place, immures in warm water (not hot)

Trench Foot - An injury of the feet resulting from prolonged exposure to wet and cold conditions that can occur at temperatures as high as 60 °F if the feet are constantly wet.

- Symptoms: Redness of skin, tingling/stinging, blisters, bleeding under the skin
- First-Aid: Remove boot/shoe, remove wet sock, dry the foot, slowly warm and keep dry.

Who is at risk?

Well this looks different too. The injuries/illness that comes from cold stress are personal, and depend on how a persons body responds. For example in northern Wisconsin a February day at 35 degrees is warm (single layer pants and a vest kind of day). While in central Florida a day at 35 degrees will a record low and the people are just not used to that, might not even have a winter coat. Hypothermia might set in faster for a person used to a warm climate.

How to Prevent Injury

The best way to limit your risk is to be prepared.

- That means checking the weather forecast for the days or week ahead.
- Dress in layers.
    - Several layers of loose clothing is a better insulator than one thick coat
    - Also allows you to shed layers if the temp rises through the day

- Bring extra socks.
    - Thick socks and boots mean your feet will sweat, more than you realize. Change your socks when they get wet or halfway through the day. Wet socks = Trench Foot
- Be prepared to take additional breaks throughout the day, to a warmer place

Summary

Watch out for others. Often times a cold related injury comes from over doing it, trying to be tough and work through, or not knowing the symptoms of frostbite and hypothermia. Don't allow your coworkers to push through when they are shivering or have wet clothing. Take pride in helping them over finishing the task. It is important that you never judge or criticizes a person that is affected by the cold. Don't make fun of people when person safety is on the line.

Questions for you

1. Are you keeping an eye on the weather forecasts and reminding your team the night before to dress properly?
2. Do you have a place to have warm breaks? Is it encouraged?
3. Have you or anyone on your team experienced frostbite/hypothermia/trenchfoot? Talk about how it felt and what they do differently now.
4. Bonus task: change your socks mid day tomorrow and see how much better it feels.