

Cold Stress

Bbbbrrrrr! “But baby it’s COLD outside!” Is that ever an understatement! That line from the famous Christmas song (performed by such greats as Ray Charles, Dean Martin, Elle Fitzgerald and Bart’s sister, Jessica Simpson) was never as true as this past week. It was COLD – dangerously cold. Temperatures plunged into the negative digits throughout the country. Yes, places like Idaho and Chicago were paralyzed by the extreme temperatures. However people in New Mexico weren’t dressed in Hawaiian shirts and shorts, sunning themselves while drinking pina coladas on lounge chairs either. Water pipes burst, gas lines were inoperable and the Los Alamos National laboratory shut down for a day. Just walking from the car to the office was painful. As with most unpleasant sensations (malodorous chemicals, eye irritants, etc.), the pain from cold exposure is a sign that we are in harm’s way and therefore we need to remove ourselves from the environment – the sooner the better. In the case of cold, there are many serious conditions that can result in devastating health effects – including death. The human defense system will do anything to ensure survival; even at the expense of losing extremities. Because loss of body heat occurs mostly through the hands, feet, and head, it is very important to keep these regions warm with proper clothing. When these regions are subjected to cold conditions, the blood vessels leading to these areas will constrict, significantly reducing the amount of blood flowing to these areas. This means that if we do not properly protect the extremities, without any cognizant judgment on our part, blood circulation to these regions will cease and cellular necrosis (death) may result. Hypothermia can occur at temperatures around 30⁰ F and is easily accelerated as the temperature decreases. Please take note of this list of symptoms associated with hypothermia: Reduction of body temperature; uncontrollable shivering; muscle rigidity; slow/irregular heart rate; low blood pressure; exhaustion; confusion; loss of reasoning; pain in extremities; severe shivering; severe blood pressure, heart rate, and respiratory reduction resulting in death So dress warmly, wear insulated gloves, socks, shoes and hats, use the buddy system, stay dry, and take breaks in warm sheltered areas. If you feel the onset of any of these symptoms or notice them in a fellow-worker, stop work, seek shelter, evaluate and if needed, get medical assistance.