

Spotlight

on Health & Safety

As Winter Bites Back... advice on Workplace Temperature

The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations (NI) 1993 states that employers must ensure the temperature in all workplaces, inside buildings is "reasonable" during working hours. This means providing reasonable comfort without the need for special clothing.

What is "reasonable" will obviously be subjective and depend on individual comfort, as well as the nature of the workplace and work activities. The Approved Code of Practice (ACOP) says that workrooms should normally be 16°C for most types of work, and at least 13°C for work involving considerable physical effort. For most kinds of work the acceptable range of thermal comfort is between 16°C and 24°C. Further advice on thermal comfort is available on the HSE website at: www.hse.gov.uk/temperature/thermal/explained.htm

Where the workplace temperature is likely to be cold, employers should consider some of the following measures:

- enclosing or insulating the product;
- providing stand alone heating systems;
- rotating work between cold and warm areas;
- providing warm protective clothing;
- allowing extra rest breaks in warm areas; and
- allowing staff to get extra hot drinks.



Working Outside

Turning to outdoor work we would like to remind members and reps that cold weather brings additional dangers to the construction industry and members out on site visits. It is essential that employers ensure sites are safe and proper facilities are provided during cold weather working. If workers do not believe their site is safe they should stop work immediately until problems are resolved.

Extra risk assessments should be carried out during extreme weather, to make sure that workers' health and safety are not put at risk. Employers should focus not just on the outside air temperature, but also the wind chill factor, as strong winds can make it feel bitterly cold in the open air. Employers must ensure appropriate protective equipment is issued and warm and dry mobile facilities for warming up are made available. Workers should be offered regular warm fluids, such as soup or hot chocolate. Rest breaks should be more frequent, and long enough to allow for proper re-warming. As regards the need for warm personal protective equipment (PPE), reps should remember that feet and toes are particularly susceptible to cold injury, whilst 40% of

body heat is also lost through the head. Appropriate protection of the hands is also important, not only to prevent injury, but also to maintain dexterity and prevent accidents.

Much available advice is common sense. For example, sedentary activity, such as time spent standing around, puts workers at greater risk of getting cold, as does being tired, hungry or thirsty. If driving is unavoidable in cold weather, employers should be encouraged to review normal vehicle emergency supplies, to make sure they are adequately prepared for vehicle breakdown, and should consider adding extra warm clothing, gloves and blankets. Where possible, employers should consider re-scheduling work for a warmer time of day, or when weather conditions have improved.

Cold-related health problems are often under-recognised. Hypothermia can strike even at moderate temperatures. Early signs include shivering, loss of coordination, slurred speech, memory loss and pale cold skin. Other indirect cold-related health problems include disease flare-ups: conditions such as arthritis, asthma and sinus irritation can be made worse in cold environments. Cold can also lead to a rise in injuries, because of reduced dexterity and coordination, and can cause a general decline in performance. Working in cold weather also increases the risk of muscular injury such as back strain. Some pre-existing medical conditions, especially those affecting circulation, can be adversely affected by cold weather. In extreme temperatures, lone working should be avoided where possible.

Details of workplace standards and useful guides on thermal comfort are also available from the Chartered Institute of Building Services Engineers (CIBSE) at: www.cibse.org.

