

Iowa Farmer Today

Winter preparation saves life and limb

By Kim McMichael

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A snowy field on the farm. Workers who are unable to avoid working in cold weather, like farmers, face an increased risk of hypothermia and frostbite.

Photo courtesy of Mary Swalla Holmes

Winter in the Midwest requires a lot of preparation.

While we may be tempted to run outside without a coat, gloves or our phone because “it will be quick,” it is paramount to be prepared to spend an extended amount of time outside. Incidents happen, especially during cold and icy conditions.

Adapting to winter weather will help reduce your risk of injury.

Anyone who works in a cold environment is at risk of cold-related illness and injuries, but workers who are unable to avoid working in cold weather, like farmers, face an increased risk.

We would like to remind workers to “be prepared and be aware” this winter to prevent cold-related injuries such as hypothermia and frostbite. Below are some helpful tips to keep yourself safe in cold temperatures and winter storms.

Know the terminology

A Winter Storm Watch means severe weather conditions, such as heavy snow and/or ice, are possible in your area in the next 12 to 36 hours. Prepare now!

A winter storm warning means severe weather conditions are expected in the next 12-24 hours with 4-6 inches of snow or sleet, or a quarter inch or more of ice expected. Seek shelter immediately!

A blizzard warning means snow and strong wind gusts (up to 35 mph or greater) will combine to produce a blinding snow, deep drifts and life-threatening wind chill expected to occur for three hours or longer.

Spotting symptoms

Frostbite can occur following prolonged exposure to low temperatures, wind or moisture. Skin can freeze at temperatures of 30°F and below.

Signs of frostbite are white, waxy or pale appearance to extremities (e.g., fingers, toes, nose, ear lobes) and skin that is cold and numb.

First aid response: Find a warm room or shelter, soak affected areas in warm (not hot) water. Avoid rubbing the affected areas as this could cause tissue damage.

Do not use a heating pad, fireplace or radiator for warming and do not warm the area if there is a risk of refreezing.

Hypothermia occurs when the core body temperature drops to a level at which normal muscle and brain functions are impaired.

Signs of hypothermia: Extreme shivering, confusion or disorientation, memory loss, slurred speech, drowsiness and exhaustion.

First aid response: Call 911 or emergency personnel. If you can't get help quickly, warm the person's body slowly and start with the body core first, not the extremities.

Do not give the person any alcohol, coffee or any hot beverage or food. Warm broth or food is better.

Preventing conditions

Wearing at least three layers of clothing is one way to protect yourself from cold-related illnesses. The outer layer of clothing should be wind

and water-resistant, including footwear. The middle layer should retain insulation, with the inner layer providing ventilation.

It is best for these layers to be loose-fitting. Extremities are especially vulnerable to frostbite, so layering socks and wearing well-insulated work gloves will help to keep your extremities safe.

Be sure to protect your head and face, as you can lose up to 40% of your body heat through your head.

If your clothes get wet, change into dry clothes as soon as possible.

Ensuring that your environment offers sources of heat can help protect your body from cold-related conditions. Use heaters for warmth, avoid touching or resting on cold surfaces, and have access to a heated shelter/vehicle if wind-chill temperatures are below 20°F.

Personal safety

Prepare for a winter emergency at home, work and in your car. Include warm clothes, blankets, water, non-perishable snacks, first aid kits and flashlights. Be sure to bring your phone and let people know if you are traveling.

Take special precautions if you have a medical condition, and check your medications to see if you need to take special precautions when working in the cold. Monitor yourself and others for symptoms of hypothermia and frostbite and stay hydrated.

Prepare for potentially icy conditions by treating surfaces with ice melt, especially areas where water is known to accumulate.

When walking in icy conditions, remember to “walk like a penguin” by taking short, slow, flat-footed steps. Keep your feet under your center of gravity and keep your hands and arms free to help adjust your balance.

Additional resources on preventing cold-related illness are available at i-cash.org, including the Winter Weather Emergency Preparedness booklet at tinyurl.com/yv4u6652.

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