 Heavy Construction Contractors Association 

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**Toolbox Talk Frostbite & Hypothermia**

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At this time of year as many of us work in unheated buildings, outdoors and/or on roofs with limited warm areas, frostbite and hypothermia are ever-present hazards. Frostbite is the result of ice crystals forming in your cellular tissue. It is readily distinguishable by a white or grayish-yellow skin tint and the lack of pain or feeling in the affected skin tissue area. Blisters often appear. The areas of the body primarily affected are the fingers, toes, ears, cheeks, and nose. A person who has frostbite once is more likely to get it again than someone who has not had it before. The injured part of the body may become forever sensitive to cold and must be protected from further frostbite.

**Preventing Frostbite**

To prevent frostbite, you should:

* Wear several layers of loose-fitting, natural fiber clothing.
* Particular attention should be given to protecting the feet, hands and head areas through the use of wool socks, gloves and/or mittens and a ski mask or other head protection.
* Protection your ears and neck against cold, and a face mask should be worn against windy weather.
* Do not consume alcohol because alcohol increases body heat loss.

**Preventing Hypothermia**

To prevent hypothermia (abnormally low body temperature), you should:

* Maintain a nutritious diet that includes heat-producing foods such as carbohydrates. Drink plenty of liquids, but not alcoholic beverages.
* If on medication, question your physician to ensure the medication does not counteract your body heat processes.
* Wear adequate protective clothing, which includes several layers of natural fiber, loose-fitting outer garments and adequate foot, hand and head protection. An easy trick to help your feet is to keep a layer of cardboard in your boot under the insole…try it.
* Remain dry. If clothing becomes wet, it should be immediately removed and replaced by dry clothing. Wool is the only natural material that affords insulation when wet.
* Avoid prolonged cold weather exposure.

**Safety Procedures**

As you know, prevention doesn't always work. So it's important to know what to do if you or someone you're with shows symptoms of cold problems. The first thing to do is to get where it's warm. Get out of any frozen, wet, or tight clothes and into warm clothes or blankets. Drink something warm, decaffeinated, and nonalcoholic. For hypothermia, call for medical help and keep the person covered with blankets or something similar. Don't use hot baths, electric blankets, or hot-water bottles. Give artificial respiration if necessary and try to keep the person awake and dry.

**For frostbite, first be aware of the don'ts:**

* Don't rub the body part, or apply a heat lamp or hot water bottle.
* Don't go near a hot stove.
* Don't break any blisters.
* Don't drink caffeine.
* Do warm the frozen body part quickly with sheets and blankets or warm (not hot!) water.

Once the body part is warm, exercise it—with one exception:

* Don't walk on frostbitten feet.
* If in doubt, get medical attention. It's a good idea to elevate the frozen body part and cover it with sterile cloths before travel.