

# Stay safe from winter weather

## It's the time of year for letter

carriers to think about the dangers of working in winter weather.

Spending a day outside on a cold day can come with hazards that may sneak up on you. Hypothermia, for example, can strike even when the air is above freezing. If your body is losing heat faster than it can generate it, your core body temperature can drop.

The signs of hypothermia include drowsiness, uncontrollable shivering, slurred speech and clumsy movements. Confusion or irrational behavior can also be symptoms, which makes hypothermia even more dangerous because of the threat of putting yourself in further danger. That's why it is important to focus on preventing hypothermia long before you experience it.

Frostbite is another threat that blows in with frigid air, and it also can creep up slowly. Frostbite preys on body parts with little insulation or blood flow, such as fingers, toes, ears and noses. In a cold environment, most of the body's energy is used to keep the internal core temperature warm. Over time, the body will begin to shift blood flow from the extremities (hands, feet, arms and legs) and outer skin to the core (chest and abdomen). This shift may cause the exposed skin and the extremities to cool rapidly and increases the risk of frostbite and hypothermia. Combine this scenario with exposure to a wet environment, and trench foot also may be a problem.

What's worse, wind, rain or snow can hasten heat loss. The wind-chill factor measures how much heat the wind strips from your body before it heats itself back up, and of course a chilly rain or even snow in the air might have the same effect. An outer layer that blocks the wind or keeps you dry is an essential part of your uniform.

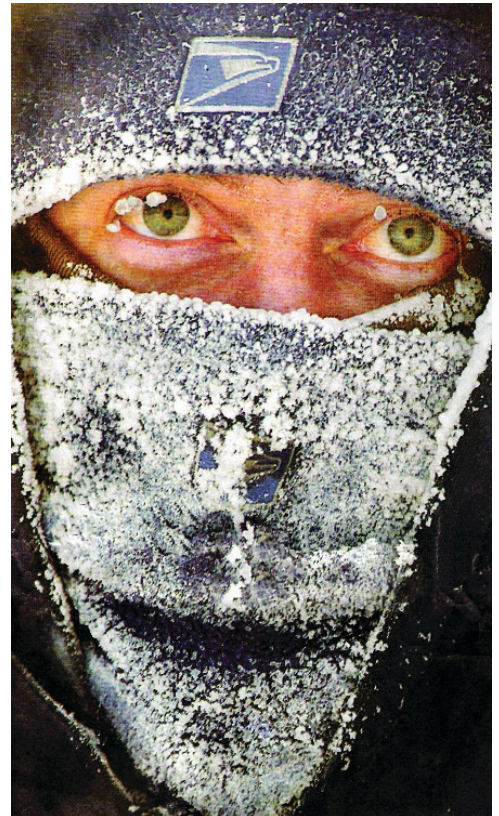
If you have a health condition such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes or hypertension (high blood pressure), or if you take certain medications, you are at greater risk of both hypothermia and frostbite. Remember, exertion uses calories that the body also needs to keep warm, so eating snacks throughout the day may help.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recommends that workers in cold conditions:

- Wear proper clothing to protect from cold, wet and windy conditions. Layer clothing to boost its insulation and to allow you to adjust as conditions change, and cover extremities with a hat, gloves, etc.
- Take breaks in warm, dry shelters.
- Eat warm, high-calorie food and drink warm beverages, but avoid drinks with caffeine—the drug constricts blood vessels, hampering the body's ability to heat extremities. Avoid nicotine for the same reason.

“The first rule of cold weather is to prevent hypothermia or frostbite by wearing the right clothing and consuming warm food and drink,” NALC Director of Safety and Health Manuel L. Peralta Jr. said. “The second rule is to know the signs and get to a warm place if the cold is getting the best of you. Warm up in your vehicle or a warm place on your route when you need to, and if you are experiencing problems, immediately contact your supervisors or dial 911 if you feel it is an emergency.”

If freezing your toes off isn't enough for you, Old Man Winter also brings



the threat of injury from walking or driving on ice and snow. Wearing proper footwear with good traction is essential, and taking shorter, more careful steps and using your eyes to seek a safe path also helps. Keep in mind, when walking as well as driving, that meltwater can refreeze and form a thin, hard sheet of “black ice” that is invisible on blacktop. Choose your path carefully, and don't take shortcuts or try to follow regular walking routes if they are dangerous.

“Let's all help each other get through another winter safe and sound so we can enjoy carrying the mail next spring,” Peralta said.

For more information, visit [nalc.org/workplace-issues/safety-and-health](http://nalc.org/workplace-issues/safety-and-health). **PR**