



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 bring hazards that may sneak up on you. Hypothermia, for example, can strike even when the air temperature 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 also can be symptoms, which makes hypothermia even more dangerous since you can put yourself in further danger. A person may be unable to walk or stand, pupils become dilated, pulse and breathing become slowed, and loss of consciousness can occur. 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 skin to the core (chest and abdomen). This shift may cause the exposed skin and the extremities to cool rapidly, and it 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 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.”

Letter carriers who suffer cold weather injuries such as hypothermia and frostbite should seek treatment immediately and file a Form CA-1 claim for traumatic injury as soon as possible. Injured letter carriers waive their right to Continuation of Pay (COP) if the CA-1 is not submitted within 30 days. The employee (through his or her chosen medical provider) still must provide the required medical proof of injury as claimed.

Claims should be filed electronically using the ECOMP web portal found at ecomp.dol.gov. Directions on how to use ECOMP and file a claim can be found on NALC website at nalc.org/workplace-issues/injured-on-the-job.

If freezing isn't enough for you, 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 avoid ice-related falls. 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.

“Safety depends on you,” Peralta said. “Look out for city carrier assistants who don't have uniforms. Let's all help each other get through another winter safe and sound so we can enjoy carrying the mail next spring.”

For more information, visit nalc.org/workplace-issues/safety-and-health. **PR**