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# The Polar Vortex: Workers' Warned to Prepare for Exposure to Cold Temperatures

Workers' Compensation

Weather forecasters have warned that the Eastern US will be subject to a significant climate change over the next few days. The Polar Vortex that spins around the North Pole has fractured, and a major push of frigid air will be heading south across the continent. Workers and employers have been cautioned to prepare for serious occupational exposures to below-freezing temperatures for weeks ahead.

## OSHA's Recommendations

The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has provided suggestions to prepare for this hazard.

## Tips To Protect Workers In Cold Environments

Prolonged exposure to freezing or cold temperatures may cause serious health problems such as trench foot, frostbite, and hypothermia. Exposure can lead to death in extreme cases, including cold water immersion. Danger signs include

uncontrolled shivering, slurred speech, clumsy movements, fatigue, and chaotic behavior. If these signs are observed, call for emergency help.

OSHA's Cold Stress Card provides a reference guide and recommendations to combat and prevent many illnesses and injuries. Available in English and Spanish, this laminated fold-up card is free to employers, workers, and the public. OSHA's suggestions are:

### **How to Protect Workers**

- Recognize the environmental and workplace conditions that may be dangerous.
- Learn the signs and symptoms of cold-induced illnesses and injuries and what to do to help workers.
- Train workers about cold-induced illnesses and injuries.
- Encourage workers to wear proper clothing for cold, wet, and windy conditions, including layers that can be adjusted to changing conditions.
- Be sure workers in extreme conditions take frequent breaks in warm, dry shelters to allow their bodies to warm up.
- Try to schedule work for the warmest part of the day.
- Avoid exhaustion or fatigue because energy is needed to keep muscles warm.
- Use the buddy system - work in pairs so that one worker can recognize danger signs.
- Drink warm, sweet beverages (sugar water, sports-type drinks) and avoid drinks with caffeine (coffee, tea, sodas, or hot chocolate) or alcohol.
- Eat warm, high-calorie foods such as hot pasta dishes.
- Remember, workers, face increased risks when they take certain medications, are in poor physical condition, or suffer from illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, or cardiovascular disease.

### **NIOSH**

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has warned of the hazards of exposure to cold. "Workers exposed to extreme cold or work in cold environments may be at risk of cold stress. Extreme cold weather is a dangerous situation that can bring on health emergencies in susceptible people, such as those without shelter, outdoor workers, and those who work in an area that is poorly insulated or without heat. What constitutes cold stress and its

effects can vary across different areas of the country. In regions relatively unaccustomed to winter weather, near-freezing temperatures are considered factors for cold stress. Whenever temperatures drop decidedly below normal, and as wind speed increases, heat can more rapidly leave your body. These weather-related conditions may lead to serious health problems.” Also see [NIOSH Fast Facts: Protecting Yourself from Cold Stress CDC-pdf](#)

## **Workers’ Compensation Benefits**

For those workers who suffer illnesses from exposure to cold, benefits are available under Workers’ Compensation programs. The benefits system provides medical, temporary, and permanent disability to employees who suffer work-related disabilities because of exposure to cold weather.

The courts have looked favorably upon such a claim. “An employee who worked in a cold, damp, unheated garage/storage building for three (3) hours on a January afternoon while suffering from a head cold contracted pneumonia from which he died approximately ten (10) days later. Compensation benefits were awarded to his widow based upon the reasoning that the exposure suffered by the decedent was greater than that which persons generally in his locality were exposed to. The three-hour “exposure” in this case was still interpreted as an “accident” rather than as an occupational exposure, as we now understand the terminology. [Richter v. E.I. Du Pont De Nemours & Co., 118 N.J.L. 404, 193 A. 194 \(1937\)](#), aff’d [119 N.J.L. 427, 197 A. 276 \(Err. & App.1938\)](#).”

Also, “Exposure to extreme heat and chilling cold in a damp environment near a smelting furnace in a drafty building was deemed causally related to fatal pneumonia and therefore was considered compensable. The Court considered that the plant conditions constituted greater exposure than that to which persons generally in the locality were subjected, so that resulting pneumonia constituted an “injury arising from and in the course of employment” within the Workers’ Compensation Act. [Kardos v. American Smelting and Refining Co., 132 N.J.L. 579, 39 A.2d 509 \(1944\)](#), aff’d [133 N.J.L. 39, 42 A.2d 271 \(Err. & App.1945\)](#).”  
Gelman, Jon L, [Workers’ Compensation Law](#), 38 NJPRAC 9.16 (Thomson-Reuters 2023).

As the Polar Vortex approaches and brings frigid temperatures, employees and employers should prepare to avoid the harmful effects of cold weather exposures.

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[Jon L. Gelman](#) of Wayne NJ is the author of [NJ Workers’ Compensation](#)

Law (West-Thomson-Reuters) and co-author of the national treatise Modern Workers' Compensation Law (West-Thomson-Reuters). For over 5 decades, the Law Offices of Jon L Gelman 1.973.696.7900 [jon@gelmans.com](mailto:jon@gelmans.com) have represented injured workers and their families who have suffered occupational accidents and illnesses.

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