Stay Safe in Winter Weather
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During the cold winter months, workers may find themselves outdoors in adverse conditions for extended periods of time. Being exposed to extreme cold and wind chill puts these workers at an increased risk of frostbite or hypothermia. More than 700 people die from hypothermia each year in the United States, and the number of injuries related to cold weather is even higher. Frostbite can cause permanent tissue damage and, in severe cases, gangrene. Dressing appropriately for the weather is one of the best ways to stay safe and warm when working outdoors this winter. Let’s review the basics.

Dress in layers
Wearing layers of clothing helps regulate your body temperature when working in extreme cold. Your outer layer of clothing should have a hood and be wind-resistant. If you wear one heavy outer layer, you may start to sweat. Try using three layers of clothing, including polypropylene thermal underwear, which will wick away moisture. You can add or remove a layer as necessary. Layered clothing also creates air pockets that trap warm air close to your body. Be sure to bring extra layers so you can change out of wet clothing as soon as possible. Even with layered clothing, workers should minimize time spent outdoors during extreme wind chill conditions to reduce their risk of exposure.

Proper footwear
When working in the cold, use insulated waterproof boots that fit loosely enough to allow for thick, warm socks. Make sure your boots have a good tread to help prevent slips and falls on icy surfaces.

Don’t forget hats, gloves and mittens!
Covering exposed skin as much as possible and keeping your extremities warm can help prevent frostbite and make you feel less cold while working outdoors. Seventy percent or more of the body’s heat can be lost through the head; always wear a hat, preferably one that covers your ears as well.

Know when to say when…
Workers should avoid working alone in extreme wind chill conditions or when temperatures are low. If you must, use the buddy system or notify coworkers so that someone can regularly check on you. When working outside for long periods of time, keep moving to increase blood flow and stay warm. Don’t work outside if you are sick or fatigued. Stop working and seek shelter immediately if you feel disoriented or experience tingling or numbness, as these may be signs of frostbite or hypothermia.

Here are some more tips for staying safe this winter:

- Eat warm, high-calorie foods and hot drinks
- Take short breaks in heated areas
- Outdoor areas should be well-lit to minimize the risk of slips, trips and falls
- Walk slowly and carefully and allow extra time for chores – never rush or run
- Use sand and salt regularly to keep walkways ice-free
- Be careful climbing on and off equipment

Dressing appropriately for the weather and minimizing time spent working outdoors in extreme conditions can help you and your employees stay safe and warm this winter. I would also like to take this opportunity to wish growers and workers a safe and productive 2011. Happy New Year!

The New York Center for Agricultural Medicine & Health (NYCAMH) gets funding from the New York State Department of Labor Hazard Abatement Board to provide on-farm safety services at no cost. NYCAMH trainings can help you fulfill some requirements for USDA, OSHA and GAPS audits. We provide the farmer with paperwork that can help document training sessions for third-party auditors. Our services are free, voluntary and confidential. All training topics are available in Spanish. Start the new season right – schedule a survey or training today! Please contact me by calling 800-343-7527, ext 291 or email ameyerhoff@nycamh.com. NYCAMH, a program of Bassett Healthcare Network, is enhancing agricultural and rural health by preventing and treating occupational injury and illness.