

Cold Storage Safety

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Many of us deal with cold hazards when we work or commute to work in the winter. For some workers, cold is a year-round hazard.

Industries which process, store or use food products have cold facilities. There, workers cut meat, move forklift loads of fish, sort bins of fruit and perform many other tasks.

Kitchens, such as those serving restaurants, industrial cafeterias and healthcare facilities also have cold storage areas where food items are received and kept until ready for use.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

Food safety is the reason for these cold areas, but they can be hazardous to your own safety.

You've seen it countless times in the movies, but people in real life do get trapped in walk-in refrigerators or freezers, and sometimes they die. Exposure to cold temperatures can cause hypothermia, a potentially fatal lowering of the body's core temperature. And, if the space is small, lack of oxygen could cause death before freezing does. Spending too long a time in a freezer, or being in continual contact with frozen items, can also cause frostbite, which is tissue damage from freezing. Amputating fingers and toes is sometimes necessary after frostbite.

Another hazard of refrigerators and freezers is wet and slippery floors, leading to slips and falls.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

How can you work safely around cold rooms? Consider these guidelines:

- Follow a system of checking cold storage areas periodically through the shift and at closing time to make sure no one is trapped inside.
- Make sure doors can be opened from the inside. Inspect them regularly to make sure they still work.
- Wear warm clothing, including a hat, when working in a cold storage area.
- Use insulated gloves when unpacking and sorting frozen foods.
- Use warm, non-slip footwear.
- Be aware that the bulky clothing which you need to keep warm can restrict your ability to move and possibly contribute to over-exertion injuries. The fatigue caused by cold and heavy clothing can also be a factor in injuries.
- You should also be aware not everyone is suited for work in a cold room. The combination of exertion and cold conditions may be unsafe for persons with a history of heart disease.
- Keep floors free of slip hazards, and use non-slip mats where necessary.
- Take extra care when lifting objects in a cold room. Thick gloves may make it difficult to get a good grip on the item. If you slip while carrying something, you can injure your back.
- Use an anti-fog solution on your safety eyewear so you can see well in spite of changing temperatures. Be prepared for that moment of blindness when you leave the cold environment and enter a warm, humid cooking area, causing your glasses to fog up.
- Take your assigned rest breaks outside of the cold area. If possible, rotate from cold room work to less stressful conditions.

FINAL WORD

Cold conditions can increase the hazards of strains and sprains in jobs such as processing poultry, meat or fish. Talk to your supervisor about the correct procedures and equipment to help you work without developing repetitive strain injuries.