WEEK 5 FEBRUARY · ~5 MIN READ · ONTARIO CONSTRUCTION

Working in the Cold: Layering, Warm-Up Breaks & Hydration

February is the long grind of winter. You're not in a blizzard, but a full shift in the cold wears you down — and cold, tired workers make mistakes. How you dress and how the breaks are set matters all day.

The hazard

Cold drains your energy and slows your hands and your thinking. Sweat that soaks a base layer turns on you the moment you stop moving. People forget to drink in winter and end up dehydrated, which makes the cold hit harder. Across a full shift it adds up to slips, errors, and cold injury — and the temperature on the sign is only part of it: wind, wet, how hard you're working, and what you've got on all change how fast you lose heat.

What to do

- **Warm-up breaks are set by the supervisor from the actual conditions** — temperature, wind chill, whether you're wet, and how heavy the work is — not by who asks first. There needs to be somewhere genuinely warm to take them, and the frequency goes up as conditions get worse.
- **Three layers:** a base that wicks, an insulating middle of fleece or wool, and a wind- and waterproof shell. Nothing cotton next to the skin — once it's wet it stays wet.
- **Vent before you sweat.** Open a zipper or drop the middle layer during heavy work, then put it back on the moment you stop. Getting this wrong is the most common way people end up cold.
- **Drink warm fluids through the day**, and don't count coffee as your hydration.
- **Eat enough.** You burn extra just staying warm, and running low leaves you chilling faster.
- **Keep spare dry gloves, socks, and a base layer on site.** Dry is the cheapest warmth there is.
- **Watch each other.** Numb hands, clumsiness, slurred speech, or someone who's gone quiet — say something. Cold, like heat, goes after judgement, so the person affected is the last to notice.

Watch out for

- A soaked base layer or a sweaty back at the end of heavy work — change it before you cool down.
- Skipping water because it's cold out.
- Bulky layers that catch on machinery or stop you moving properly.
- Anyone who's tired, hungry, wet, or on medication that affects circulation — they'll feel it sooner.

Talk it over

- Are our warm-up breaks matched to today's wind chill and the wet, or are we running on last week's schedule?
- Where's the warm-up area, and is it actually warm right now?

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