



Cold can hurt!

By Julie Shelley, Fort Rucker, Ala.

A popular motivational anecdote goes something like this: “That which does not kill you makes you stronger.” How many times have you heard that one? While this oft-quoted line might have some fundamental truth, it forgets to mention that those things that don’t kill you often hurt a lot.

Cold-weather operations present many hazards that, if not approached correctly, can lead to disaster: severe cold injuries, carbon monoxide poisoning, and tent fires, just to name a few. But, the winter environment also introduces other, not-so-serious risks that can increase pain and decrease productivity. These minor aches and pains are not only a nuisance; they are also costly in terms of lost man-hours and dollars.

Fortunately, most cold injuries are completely preventable if appropriate, precautionary measures are taken. Be on the lookout for these symptoms and seek the proper medical treatment if you or one of your people exhibits any of the following.

Frostnip

This type of injury, along with more serious ailments such as

frostbite, can occur anytime the air temperature is below freezing. Frostnip is caused by water freezing on the skin’s surface. In exposed skin, the risk of a freezing injury increases with higher wind speeds.

Frostnipped skin will appear red and possibly swollen. Although painful, frostnip generally is limited to the skin’s surface — the face, ears, and extremities being particularly vulnerable — and causes no further damage after the affected area is re-warmed. However, repeated frostnip in the same spot can dry and crack the skin, making it very sensitive. It also is important to note that distinguishing between frostnip and frostbite can be very difficult. Frostnip must be taken very seriously and all frostnip injuries should be reported immediately.

Sunburn

You don’t have to be in the desert or at the beach to get sunburned — the threat of sunburn depends on the intensity of sunlight, not air temperature. Add in snow, ice, and lightly colored objects, all of which reflect the sun’s rays, and the scene is set for a major sunburn injury if you’re not careful.

Sunburned skin will be painful and hot to the touch, appear red, and possibly swollen and blistered.

To prevent sunburn anytime of the year and in all environments, use sunscreen with a sun protection factor of at least 15 and cover all exposed skin. In cold weather, sunscreen should be alcohol-free. If you should become sunburned, prevent further exposure and apply a moisturizing lotion; aspirin or acetaminophen may be given for pain. People with large areas of injured or blistered skin should be evacuated for medical treatment.

Snow blindness

Snow blindness, like sunburn, is a threat posed by the intensity of the sun’s rays, not the temperature outside. Solar radiation can “sunburn” unprotected eyes, leading to snow blindness. Symptoms of snow blindness include painful, gritty eyes with profuse tearing, blurred vision, and possibly, a headache. People suffering from snow blindness should be removed from direct sunlight and allowed to rest in a dark area with their eyes covered by cool, wet bandages until they can be evacuated. Bacitracin or erythromycin ophthalmic ointment also should be applied.

Protective eyewear or goggles that block at least 90 percent of ultraviolet radiation can help prevent snow blindness, and sunglasses with visible light transmittance in the 5 to 10 percent range are needed to reduce the sun’s reflection off snow. In addition to protective eyewear, sideshields or deeply wrapped lens designs should be used to reduce the chances of eye injury. ▶

Editor’s Note: *Courtesy of the Army Safety Center*