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RISKAlert



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Winter Weather Challenges - Recess and Lunch Activities

Most of the country is experiencing the first blast of prolonged frigid temperatures. When extreme cold arrives, so do questions about cancelling outdoor recess, lunch or physical education.

The primary safety concern during extreme cold weather is the risk of frostbite. Frostbite is the freezing of skin and damage to underlying blood vessels due to exposure to the extreme cold. Frostbite occurs when the skin temperature reaches and stays at or below 23 °F degrees. Although students are rarely outdoors for an extended period of time, frostbite can occur to exposed skin within 20 - 30 minutes with modest wind and temperatures in the teens.

State education and local health departments often do not provide guidelines for school administrators, so a local decision needs to be formulated and implemented. Having guidelines or policies in place is important; principals and teachers need to know when students should be kept indoors. Guidelines or policies ensure consistency and appropriate safety for all students. For example, absent rain or snow, recess is always in session when temperatures are above freezing. As an alternative to cancelling outdoor

activities, consider reducing the time by half when temperatures are between 15°F and 32°F, with students kept in who are ill or do not have sufficient clothing (e.g., coats, hats, and gloves). Schools will cancel outdoor activities and hold recess indoors when temperatures drop below 20°F. These temperature recommendations (inclusive of wind chill) are only suggestions -discretion is always required when evaluating weather conditions. The school nurse or physician is a good resource.

Playground Concerns

Extreme cold temperatures change the fall-absorbing characteristics of playground surface materials. Winter weather affects all types of playground surfacing. In extreme temperatures, surfacing material may harden and lose its ability to cushion falls. Another concern with winter weather is the accumulation of snow and ice, creating a hard, slippery surface.



While many schools chose sand as a surface cover for its low initial cost and ease of installation, sand possesses several disadvantages. Environmental conditions such as rainy weather, high humidity, and freezing temperatures all reduce cushioning potential for sand. In particularly windy conditions, proper depth may be difficult to maintain. In wet conditions, the small particles in sand bind together and become less effective and then freeze when there is prolonged cold temperatures. Pea gravel, wood chips and mulch also lose their protective ability in freezing weather.

When the temperature drops below freezing, have teachers or custodial staff check the viability of playground surfaces below allowing children to use the playground. In some cases, raking the fill will improve its cushioning features.

Resources

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) - National Weather Service. Winter Safety
<http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/winter/cold.shtml>

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) - National Weather, NWS Wind-chill Chart
Service Winter Safety
<http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/winter/windchill.shtml>

Ready.gov - Winter Storms and Extreme Cold
<http://www.ready.gov/winter-weather>

<http://www.wrightspecialty.com>

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Wright Specialty Insurance | 333 Earle Ovington Blvd., Suite 505 | Uniondale | NY | 11553