

# LABORSAFE

DECEMBER 2004

*A guide for health & safety at home & on the job*



## FLU TIME:

## NEW PROBLEMS, OLD SOLUTIONS



**N**o flu shot? While a shot is the best way to prevent the flu, there are other ways to help guard against catching it. And if you do get the flu, there are some new medications that can reduce the effects of this seasonal, infectious affliction.

In other words, there's more to this picture than just the scary numbers making headlines in 2004; but let's review the numbers anyway because of how much they've dominated health news.

When the British government blocked pharmaceutical manufacturer Chiron from exporting 48 million doses of flu vaccine to America, half the nation's supply became unavailable. Here in New York state, the shortage is worse: Only one third of the needed doses are available. Health Commissioner Antonia Novello has determined that 5.7 million New Yorkers are at high risk and should receive shots of the flu vaccine before the rest of us. High-risk groups include:

- children from six to 23 months old
- adults over 65 years old
- nursing home residents
- women who are or will be pregnant during flu season
- people with chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, kidney problems or sickle cell disease. This also includes people who have an impaired immune system or who are taking medications to suppress their immune system.
- health care workers likely to be exposed to the flu by helping flu victims.

Laborers and family members who are considered high-risk should contact their physician or county health department to obtain shots of flu vaccine during this season.

But what about the rest of us – those who are not in a high-risk group? Fortunately, not everyone who doesn't get a vaccine this year will become ill. The flu vaccine shortage simply intensifies the need for ordinary anti-infection safeguards.

Practice the following safety measures to effectively reduce hazards associated with exposure to the flu virus:

- Avoid close contact with those who are sick.
- If you are sick, protect others by keeping your distance from them.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, and then dispose of the tissue immediately.
- Wash your hands after coughing or sneezing, using warm water and soap or an alcohol-based cleaner.
- When sick, stay home from work or school so others won't catch the flu from you.

### Antiviral medications

Antiviral medications can reduce the severity and shorten the duration of flu symptoms by as much as one or one-and-a-half days and should be used as soon as you start to develop the flu. These drugs are not a substitute for getting a flu immunization each year, but are important for controlling outbreaks and preventing the spread of infection. Ask your doctor about specific antiviral medications; they vary depending upon your specific flu infection. [H&S](#)

# NEW YEAR SPIRIT

## Avoid hangovers, hazardous drinking and being hostage to the bottle this season

**W**hile a lot of folks will be drinking in the New Year, many others – millions, in fact – are trying to figure out how not to drink once 2005 rolls around. Health-related do's and don'ts are high on people's lists of resolutions each January, and common among them is cutting down on alcohol.

Certainly, a glass of beer, bubbly or spiked eggnog is as traditional as Father Time's flowing beard, but when does it cross the line from socially acceptable to unhealthy or downright dangerous?

Taking a sensible approach to drinking, whether you've encountered problems in the past or want to set a good role model for children, is a good idea at a time when alcohol abuse is a growing problem for American families.

### Some sobering facts

Alcohol is the nation's single most used and abused drug. The ramifications of unchecked drinking are enormous:

- ❖ The number of adults who abuse alcohol or are alcohol dependent has been rising steadily, from 13.8 million in 1991-92 (7.4% of the population) to 17.6 million in 2001-02 (8.5%) to 21.6 million people in 2003 (nearly 10%), according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.
- ❖ 1 out of 4 American families struggles with alcohol problems.
- ❖ Alcoholism is a disease that destroys lives and families. Heavy drinking contributes to heart disease, cancer and stroke, and alcoholics have a higher rate of suicide.
- ❖ Alcohol is a major cause of automobile fatalities, with alcohol-related car crashes the #1 killer of young people 15-24.
- ❖ The average 18-year-old has seen roughly 100,000 TV commercials that encourage him or her to drink.

**For health and safety's sake:**

**Never** drink and drive.

**Don't** mix drugs and alcohol.

**Don't** drink if you're pregnant.

**Seek** out non-alcohol-focused events.

**Seek** support when you need it.



Give yourself the biggest gift of all this year – a sensible, health-conscious approach to drinking.

### In the workplace

Overdrinking damages the workplace as well as the home:

- ❖ Some 500 million workdays are lost each year due to alcoholism.
- ❖ Alcohol abuse by employees leads to morale problems, absenteeism, lost productivity, injuries, increased health insurance claims, theft and fatalities.
- ❖ Employers also lose time and money when they must divert company resources toward alcohol abuse issues.

### Think before you drink

If you experience any of the following, it's likely you consume too much:

- ❖ changes or deterioration in personality, appearance, health habits and personal values
- ❖ blackouts or loss of memory.
- ❖ difficulty stopping drinking once you've started
- ❖ a preference for drinking alone
- ❖ breaking promises and avoiding responsibilities
- ❖ neglect or abuse of family and friends.

### How to cut down this holiday season

With so many parties and other occasions to drink, it can be hard to avoid alcohol and stay disciplined. A few tips:

- ❖ Stick to moderate amounts of alcohol – one to two mixed drinks, 12-16 ounces of wine or two to three beers.
- ❖ Drink white wine instead of red. Choose non-alcoholic beer or wine whenever you can. Dilute alcoholic beverages with water or club soda. Alternate water or a non-alcoholic alternative with your alcoholic drinks.

- ❖ Avoid “topping” drinks.
- ❖ Eat enough to increase your tolerance if you are drinking.
- ❖ Be aware that the national legal limit for blood alcohol concentration when driving is 0.05.
- ❖ Become the designated driver in your group.

#### For parents of young people:

Educate yourself about underage drinking, understand the risks associated with it and make a conscious effort to talk to your kids about alcohol abuse and prevention:

- ❖ 31 % of all students have their first whole drink before the age of 13; more than 40% of those who start drinking at 14 or younger go on to become alcoholics.
- ❖ Know your children’s friends and where they hang out. Make time to be with them.
- ❖ Establish rules about drugs and alcohol. Enforce them.
- ❖ Encourage activities and habits that foster self-esteem, self-discipline and responsibility.
- ❖ Keep lines of communications open, especially if your child is away at college, where the availability of alcohol, absence of parents and pressure to fit in can alter judgment and put sensible young adults at risk.
- ❖ Make it clear that you disapprove of underage drinking, alcohol abuse and drinking and driving.
- ❖ Set a good example. Don’t stockpile beer or liquor in your home.
- ❖ Suspect a problem? Get help now. Contact your school, church, community organization, county health department, a counselor or your local police department. Check on the resources listed here.

#### Where to go for help:

- ❖ National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, [www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)
- ❖ American Council for Drug Education, [www.acde.org](http://www.acde.org)
- ❖ Partnership for Recovery, a coalition of non-profit alcohol and drug treatment providers, <http://partnershipforrecovery.org>
- ❖ Alcoholics Anonymous, [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org)
- ❖ Al-Anon/Alateen, for friends, family members, children and teenagers, 1-888-4AL-ANON; [www.al-anon.alateen.org](http://www.al-anon.alateen.org)
- ❖ For college students and parents, [www.beerbooze-books.com](http://www.beerbooze-books.com); [www.factsontap.org](http://www.factsontap.org); and the U.S. Department of Higher Education’s Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention, [www.edc.org/hec](http://www.edc.org/hec) H&S

# PREVENTING FALLS

## Practice safety measures around skylights, roofs, floor openings

Falls can be attributed to many factors, including unstable working surfaces, misuse of fall protection equipment and, unfortunately, human error.

A survey conducted in seven states by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health revealed that approximately 22 percent of the fatal falls reported to state occupational safety and health officials occurred when workers fell through skylight openings or smoke-vent skylights. New construction has started to increase the use of these dual-purpose openings, which are translucent plastic domes that serve both as skylights and automatic smoke vents in case of fire.

Workers can prevent danger and avoid fatalities by following the standard precautions for guarding roof openings and by improving their overall awareness of the hazards involved in working near openings at great heights.

#### Basic fall protection

- ❖ Never sit, lean or step on a skylight or covering placed over an open hole.
- ❖ Guard skylights or holes created before leaving the work area.
- ❖ Ask a supervisor for safety procedures.
- ❖ Install railings or screens guarding all skylights and other openings in roofs before roofing work begins, and keep in place until construction is completed.
- ❖ Use a personal fall arrest system (PFAS) – full body harness, lanyard, connectors and appropriate anchorage points – when working over an unguarded or uncovered opening more than 6 feet above a lower level.
- ❖ The PFAS should be tied off only to anchorage points that the employer has identified as safe. Inspect daily, and report any damage to a supervisor. H&S



# GET A GRIP

## on winter weather workplace safety

It's the kind of common sense suggestions we grumbled about when we were kids going out to play in winter: Don't forget to put on a coat, a hat, some gloves, a scarf. But as adults, we know that these precautions make good sense – especially for workers exposed to the cold for extended periods on job sites.

“The fact is, cold weather brings a variety of hazards to the workplace and heightens ordinary safety risks in significant ways, resulting in injuries, illness and time lost on the job,” says NYS Laborers' Health & Safety Fund Executive Director Mickey Kelly. Consider:

- ❖ The risk of falls increases due to slippery surfaces.
- ❖ Communication among workers can decrease when ear warmers, scarves and masks cover workers' ears.
- ❖ Gloves can loosen workers' grips.

**Falls** increase in winter weather due to ice and snow reducing traction. Working on ladders and scaffolding becomes particularly hazardous when these surfaces are covered with slippery, frozen precipitation. Now is a good time to examine the soles of work boots for excess wear that would reduce traction and to replace or resole them.

**Communications** can be confused as workers experience hearing problems caused by shielding the ears from the cold. Workers can sidestep these problems and get the clarity they need to ensure safety on the job site simply by asking for verification that directions and questions are clearly understood by fellow workers.

**Wearing gloves** introduces the risk of hands slipping off tools and other materials when the gloves become slippery from moisture and hands inside them become numb. Slippery and weakened grips also can contribute to

falls. Take extra precautions when handling such potentially slippery items as wet planks, scaffold sections, metal columns and beams, and tool handles.



In addition to safety risks, a cold climate introduces health hazards:

- ❖ Frostbite occurs when skin actually freezes.
- ❖ Hypothermia lowers the internal body temperature.
- ❖ Breathing difficulties are more common, especially among workers who are already susceptible to bronchitis, asthma or pneumonia.

**Frostbite** can cause permanent damage, including amputation, in extreme cases, of such vulnerable areas as fingers, toes, ears, noses and cheeks. The main warning sign: white skin that feels cold to the touch. Avoid frostbite by wearing gloves, wool socks, hats that cover the ears and face masks. Consult a physician for treatment, which may include immersing affected areas in warm water or wrapping them in warm compresses.

**Hypothermia** can cause confusion and lethargy, which intensify the risk of falls. In extreme cases, it can cause loss of consciousness and heart failure. The first sign of hypothermia is often shivering, as the body activates muscles involuntarily to generate heat. To protect yourself, keep the torso warm with extra clothing or blankets, dress in layers and remove wet clothing, but also be sure to avoid sweating. As with frostbite, treatment should also involve a physician's guidance.

**Breathing difficulties** include shortness of breath or difficulty catching your breath, the principal warning signs. Wear a mask or face covering to help prevent such difficulties. Also consult your physician for advice on treating this problem. Options may include medication in the form of pills, nasal sprays, mists and inhalers. Home air purifiers and humidifiers may prevent breathing problems by improving the quality of indoor air. H&S