



AAC Publications

Frostbite at High Camp

Alaska, Denali, West Buttress

At 11:17 a.m. on May 25, a 49-year-old male and his 40-year-old male climbing partner contacted the mountaineering rangers at 14,200 feet via family radio service (FRS) to report that both individuals had deep frostbite injuries. The injured climbers were camped at 17,200 feet on Denali's West Buttress Route. They reported that the injuries had been sustained during their ascent from 14,200-foot camp to high camp the day before.

The 49-year-old climber reported deep frostbite in both of his hands, and the 40-year-old reported deep frostbite in both of his feet. The climbers requested a rescue due to their inability to safely navigate the technical terrain below the 17,200-foot camp with their injuries. At the time of the initial radio communication, the team said they were prepared to remain in camp "for several days" as a significant storm event enveloped the mountain and prevented safe travel between the two camps.

During the storm, the climbers and mountaineering rangers maintained regular radio contact to discuss treatment recommendations and evacuation plans. When the storm subsided on May 28, three days after the initial report, the patients and NPS personnel rendezvoused at 15,400 feet on the West Buttress. Following a thorough assessment of both climbers, the patient with frostbitten hands was assisted on foot to 14,200-foot camp, while the patient with frostbitten feet was packaged and transported via ski toboggan to prevent further injury. The patients remained under NPS care overnight and then evacuated to Talkeetna by helicopter on May 29. A frost-bite specialist subsequently evaluated both climbers at a hospital in Wasilla, Alaska.

ANALYSIS

Frostbite injuries can have debilitating and long-lasting consequences. It is of paramount importance to actively rewarm any body parts that become numb while climbing in cold conditions, by windmilling the arms to move blood to the fingers, for example, or by placing the affected extremities on your own or a partner's warm, bare skin. If unable to rewarm a cooling body part, climbers must seek shelter or descend to more hospitable conditions to prevent further frostbite injury.

If stranded by conditions, as these climbers were, frozen tissue should be rewarmed by skin-to-skin contact or a warm-water bath (99–102°F/37–39°C), but only if there is no chance of refreezing the tissue. Do not rub the affected areas. (Source: Denali Mountaineering Rangers.)

ANOTHER FROSTBITE CASE REQUIRING EVACUATION: On June 6, a 62-year-old climber was evacuated via helicopter from 14,200-foot camp due to severe frostbite injuries to the fingers and toes of all four extremities, preventing his safe descent to base camp under his own power.

Images

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