



HALTING HYPOTHERMIA

Cold Can Be Dangerous

The frosty air of winter can be invigorating. But cold air can also pose threats to your health, whether you're indoors or outside. If your body temperature drops too low, it can lead to a serious, sometimes deadly condition known as hypothermia. Learn to recognize the signs of this condition, and take steps to keep yourself and your family warm and safe during this chilly season.

A normal body temperature is 98.6 °F. Just a few degrees lower—below 95°—can be dangerous, especially for the very young and very old.

“The body is finely tuned to operate within a narrow temperature range inside the body, despite large differences in temperature outside the body. We have all sorts of mechanisms—like adjusting the size of our small blood vessels and shivering—to help us maintain a healthy body temperature,” says National Institutes of Health’s Dr. Basil Eldadah, who oversees research on the medical care of older adults. “But older adults and young children are more

susceptible to the effects of outside temperature changes. When the body’s inside temperature strays beyond that narrow range, body functions don’t operate well.”

Low body temperatures can impair vital organs. When cold affects the body, people may have trouble thinking clearly, talking properly, or moving well. They may not realize what’s happening, or they might not be able to take steps to warm up or ask for help.

Anyone who spends much time outdoors in very cold weather can get hypothermia. But hypothermia can happen anywhere—not just outside and not just in bitter winter weather. It can strike when temperatures are cool—for example, if a person becomes chilled from rain, sweat, or being in cold water.

“Even during the heat of summer, older people and very small children are at risk if air conditioning makes their homes too cold,” Eldadah says. Certain medications and alcohol can also raise the risk for hypothermia.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF HYPOTHERMIA

Left untreated, hypothermia can quickly turn dangerous. Several hundred people in the U.S.—half of them age 65 or older—die from hypothermia each year.

“If you suspect that someone you know or love may be at risk of hypothermia, it’s important to know the signs and symptoms, and take quick action if needed,” Eldadah says. “First get the person out of the cold or wet environment if possible, remove any wet clothes, and cover the person with dry blankets or whatever’s handy.” Offer the person something warm to drink, but avoid alcohol or caffeinated beverages like coffee.

“Also avoid things like a hot-water bath or a heating pad,” says Eldadah. “External heat sources for hypothermia can be risky because of the potential for things like burns, low blood pressure, or irregular heart rhythms. Active rewarming techniques are best used in settings where doctors can closely monitor a patient’s vital signs, so getting professional help is important.”

To help prevent hypothermia in the first place, Eldadah says, “Follow some of the common sense advice that we’ve probably all heard. Dress in layers; cover up with blankets; and if you expect to be out in the wind, rain or snow, wear a jacket with a waterproof and windproof outer shell.”

To keep warm at home, wear socks, slippers, and a cap or hat. Set your heat at 68° or higher when it’s cold outside. To save on heating bills, close off rooms you’re not using. If you need help paying your home heating bills, you may qualify for an energy assistance program.

Signs of Hypothermia

If you see these warning signs of hypothermia, call 911.

EARLY SIGNS:

- Cold feet and hands
- Puffy or swollen face
- Pale skin
- Shivering (although people with hypothermia don’t always shiver)
- Slower speech or slurring words
- Acting sleepy
- Being angry or confused

LATER SIGNS:

- Slow or clumsy movement, trouble walking
- Stiff and jerky arm or leg movements
- Slow heartbeat that is not regular
- Slow, shallow breathing
- Blacking out or losing consciousness

