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Hypothermia: Cold Weather Safety for Older Adults

If you are like most people, you feel cold every now and then during the winter.

What you may not know is that just being really cold can make you very sick.

Older adults can lose body heat fast—faster than when they were young. Changes in your body that come with aging can make it harder for you to be aware of getting cold.

Older woman wearing winter clothes

A big chill can turn into a dangerous problem before an older person even knows what's happening. Doctors call this serious problem hypothermia.

What Is Hypothermia?

Hypothermia is what happens when your body temperature gets very low. For an older person, a body temperature of 95°F or lower can cause many health problems, such as a heart attack, kidney problems, liver damage, or worse.

Being outside in the cold, or even being in a very cold house, can lead to hypothermia. Try to stay away from cold places, and pay attention to how cold it is where you are. You can take steps to lower your chance of getting hypothermia.

Bob's Story

Vermont winters can be very cold. Last December, I wanted to save some money so I turned my heat down to 62°F. I didn't know that would put my health in danger. Luckily, my son Tyler came by to check on me. He saw that I was only wearing a light shirt and that my house was cold. Ty said I was speaking slowly, shivering, and having trouble walking. He wrapped me in a blanket and called 9-1-1. Turns out I had hypothermia. My son's

quick thinking saved my life. Now on cold days, I keep my heat at least at 68°F and wear a sweater in the house.

Keep Warm Inside

Living in a cold house, apartment, or other building can cause hypothermia. In fact, hypothermia can happen to someone in a nursing home or group facility if the rooms are not kept warm enough. If someone you know is in a group facility, pay attention to the inside temperature and to whether that person is dressed warmly enough.

People who are sick may have special problems keeping warm. Do not let it get too cold inside and dress warmly. Even if you keep your temperature between 60°F and 65°F, your home or apartment may not be warm enough to keep you safe. This is a special problem if you live alone because there is no one else to feel the chilliness of the house or notice if you are having symptoms of hypothermia.

Here are some tips for keeping warm while you're inside:

- Set your heat to at least 68–70°F. To save on heating bills, close off rooms you are not using. Close the vents and shut the doors in these rooms, and keep the basement door closed. Place a rolled towel in front of all doors to keep out drafts.
- Make sure your house isn't losing heat through windows. Keep your blinds and curtains closed. If you have gaps around the windows, try using weather stripping or caulk to keep the cold air out.
- Dress warmly on cold days even if you are staying in the house. Throw a blanket over your legs. Wear socks and slippers.
- When you go to sleep, wear long underwear under your pajamas, and use extra covers. Wear a cap or hat.
- Make sure you eat enough food to keep up your weight. If you don't eat well, you might have less fat under your skin. Body fat helps you to stay warm.
- Drink alcohol moderately, if at all. Alcoholic drinks can make you lose body heat.
- Ask family or friends to check on you during cold weather. If a power outage leaves you without heat, try to stay with a relative or friend.

You may be tempted to warm your room with a space heater. But, some space heaters are fire hazards, and others can cause carbon monoxide poisoning. The Consumer Product Safety Commission has information on the use of space heaters. Read the following for more information: [Reducing Fire Hazards for Portable Electric](#)

Bundle Up on Windy, Cold Days

A heavy wind can quickly lower your body temperature. Check the weather forecast for windy and cold days. On those days, try to stay inside or in a warm place. If you have to go out, wear warm clothes, and don't stay out in the cold and wind for a long time.

Here are some other tips:

- Dress for the weather if you have to go out on chilly, cold, or damp days.
- Wear loose layers of clothing. The air between the layers helps to keep you warm.
- Put on a hat and scarf. You lose a lot of body heat when your head and neck are uncovered.
- Wear a waterproof coat or jacket if it's snowy.
- Change your clothes right away if they get damp or wet.

Illness, Medicines, and Cold Weather

Some illnesses may make it harder for your body to stay warm.

- Thyroid problems can make it hard to maintain a normal body temperature.
- Diabetes can keep blood from flowing normally to provide warmth.
- Parkinson's disease and arthritis can make it hard to put on more clothes, use a blanket, or get out of the cold.
- Memory loss can cause a person to go outside without the right clothing.

Talk with your doctor about your health problems and how to prevent hypothermia.

Taking some medicines and not being active also can affect body heat. These include medicines you get from your doctor and those you buy over-the-counter, such as some cold medicines. Ask your doctor if the medicines you take may affect body heat. Always talk with your doctor before you stop taking any medication.

Here are some topics to talk about with your doctor to stay safe in cold weather:

- Ask your doctor about signs of hypothermia.

- Talk to your doctor about any health problems and medicines that can make hypothermia a special problem for you. Your doctor can help you find ways to prevent hypothermia.
- Ask about safe [ways to stay active](#) even when it's cold outside.

What Are the Warning Signs of Hypothermia?

Sometimes it is hard to tell if a person has hypothermia. Look for clues. Is the house very cold? Is the person not dressed for cold weather? Is the person speaking slower than normal and having trouble keeping his or her balance?

Watch for the signs of hypothermia in yourself, too. You might become confused if your body temperature gets very low. Talk to your family and friends about the warning signs so they can look out for you.

Early signs of hypothermia:

- Cold feet and hands
- Puffy or swollen face
- Pale skin
- Shivering (in some cases the person with hypothermia does not shiver)
- Slower than normal speech or slurring words
- Acting sleepy
- Being angry or confused

Later signs of hypothermia:

- Moving slowly, trouble walking, or being clumsy
- Stiff and jerky arm or leg movements
- Slow heartbeat
- Slow, shallow breathing
- Blacking out or losing consciousness

Call 9-1-1 right away if you think someone has warning signs of hypothermia.

What to do after you call 9-1-1:

- Try to move the person to a warmer place.

- Wrap the person in a warm blanket, towels, or coats—whatever is handy. Even your own body warmth will help. Lie close, but be gentle.
- Give the person something warm to drink, but avoid drinks with alcohol or caffeine, such as regular coffee.
- Do not rub the person's legs or arms.
- Do not try to warm the person in a bath.
- Do not use a heating pad.

Hypothermia and the Emergency Room

The only way to tell for sure that someone has hypothermia is to use a special thermometer that can read very low body temperatures. Most hospitals have these thermometers. In the emergency room, doctors will warm the person's body from inside out. For example, they may give the person warm fluids directly by using an IV. Recovery depends on how long the person was exposed to the cold and his or her general health.

Is There Help for My Heating Bills?

If you are having a hard time paying your heating bills, there are some resources that might help. Contact the [National Energy Assistance Referral service](#) at **1-866-674-6327** (toll-free; TTY, **1-866-367-6228**) or [email the National Energy Assistance Referral \(NEAR\) project](#) to get information about the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

If your home doesn't have enough insulation, contact your state or local energy agency or the local power or gas company. They may be able to give you information about weatherizing your home. This can help keep heating bills down. These agencies and companies may also have special programs for people who have a limited income and qualify for help paying the heating bill. Your local [Area Agency on Aging](#), senior center, or social service agency may have information on these programs.

For More Information About Cold Weather Safety

Eldercare Locator

1-800-677-1116 (toll-free)

eldercarelocator@n4a.org

<https://eldercare.acl.gov>

Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program

National Energy Assistance Referral Hotline (NEAR)

1-866-674-6327 (toll-free)

energyassistance@ncat.org

<https://liheapch.acf.hhs.gov/help>

National Association of Area Agencies on Aging

1-202-872-0888

info@n4a.org

www.n4a.org

Consumer Product Safety Commission

1-800-638-2772 (toll-free)

1-301-595-7054 (TTY)

www.cpsc.gov

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