

Winter Weather Safety for Older Adults



Winter is nearly upon us. With its shorter days and colder temperatures, this season raises health concerns for everyone, especially the elderly. Frigid weather can pose special challenges for older people because they don't respond to cold the same way younger people do. Here are some things to consider to help you or your loved one remain as healthy as possible throughout the winter months.

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. 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.

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. Wear layers of loose-fitting clothing, even when you're indoors. Throw a blanket over your legs. Wear socks and slippers. Your body may have a delayed reaction to the cold, so even if you're venturing out for only a short time, wear a hat, scarf, gloves and other warm clothing to avoid losing too much body heat. 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.

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.**

Fall risks. Snow and ice are obvious hazards that can cause anyone to fall, but seniors are especially susceptible to injury. Their limbs may stiffen up after spending time in the cold, making them temporarily less mobile even when they come indoors. Snow and ice, when tracked in, may make floors slippery, too. Balance problems can make navigating in the cold even more difficult.

To minimize the risk of falls, wear shoes with good traction. When navigating in snow and ice, consider using a mobility device, like a walker, even if you don't normally use one in warmer weather.

Chronic pain. The cold may aggravate conditions like arthritis. Often, pain flare-ups can be attributed, at least in part, to changes in barometric pressure. Pressure tends to drop before inclement weather sets in, and many people claim they can "feel it in their bones." Barometric pressure changes may cause tissues to expand, placing stress on the joints, resulting in pain and difficulty with movement.

Heart problems. Cold weather causes the blood to thicken and arteries to constrict, placing more stress on the heart. These conditions increase the likelihood that an older person may suffer a stroke or heart attack. Research has indicated a correlation between cooler temperatures and higher blood pressure in individuals 65 and older.

Delayed immune response. Because seniors have a delayed immediate immune response, winter epidemics like the flu can be especially troublesome. Compromised immune function can make older people more likely to experience other health setbacks, like pneumonia, after a bout of the flu. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that more than 200,000 people are hospitalized annually because of the flu, and the majority of them are seniors. Influenza can aggravate any chronic health conditions an older person already has, such as kidney failure or heart disease. Dehydration is also common among people who have the flu and can be especially detrimental for seniors.

Keep up with immunizations. An older person, even one who seems relatively healthy, should keep up with recommended immunizations (including the influenza vaccine). Family members and caregivers should also be vaccinated for the flu to reduce the risk of illness as much as possible. Flu season begins in the fall and can run through the spring, but it tends to peak between December and February.

Sundowners Syndrome. People with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia may exhibit higher levels of agitation, anger, confusion, and memory loss during the evening hours. In the winter months, symptoms of "Sundowners Syndrome" may intensify because the decreased daylight interferes with affected seniors' circadian rhythms (also known as their internal clock).

Maintain a routine. To mitigate the impact of Sundowners Syndrome, follow a routine as much as possible to help the older person stay on a schedule. Keep evening activity and noise to a minimum. Allow as much natural light as possible to enter the home during the day. In some cases, medication may ease agitation and help the older person fall asleep.

Don't overlook the importance of diet and exercise. Eating a balanced diet can keep seniors feeling their best through all seasons. Supplementation may be needed if they aren't getting adequate nutrients through diet alone. Getting enough vitamins and minerals can minimize the effects of certain health conditions and provide seniors with the strength and stamina they need for daily tasks. Moderate exercise can help the older person remain mobile, reducing the risk of falls and enhancing overall well-being, keeping the "winter blues" at bay.

Check in with your loved one periodically. It is always a good idea to check on your older loved one regularly, but it is critical during the winter months. Social isolation is a problem for many seniors, especially when cold weather can make it difficult for them to get out of the house. A lack of opportunities to socialize can have a negative effect on overall health. Many seniors enjoy the face-to-face communication made possible by Skype and FaceTime. Using these channels can better help you assess whether the older person seems unwell or needs assistance caring for himself or his home.

Understanding how the cold affects seniors can help you ensure that they take proactive steps to prevent falls and illnesses during the winter. Looking out for their well-being during this season increases the likelihood that they can enjoy optimal health all year long.

7 Highly Effective Portable Heater Safety Habits

1 Keep all sides of the heater at least 3 feet from beds, clothes, curtains, papers, sofas and other items that can catch fire.

2 Never run the heater's cord under rugs or carpeting and never power the heater with an extension cord or power strip.

3 Make sure the heater is not near water. **NEVER** touch it if you are wet.

3'

4 Place the heater on a stable, level surface, located where it will not be knocked over.

5 Never leave the heater operating while unattended or while you are sleeping.

7 Check SaferProducts.gov to see if your electric heater has been recalled.

6 If the heater's cord or plug is **HOT**, disconnect the heater and contact an authorized repair person. If any part of the outlet is hot, contact a certified electrician.