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Hypothermia: A Cold Weather Hazard

Edgar is a retired mailman. Every winter there are a few snowstorms in Virginia where he lives. One day last year the temperature hovered around 10°F, and a snowstorm left 2 feet of snow on the ground, causing the power lines to snap. The temperature inside Edgar's apartment quickly dropped to 55°F. When his neighbor checked on him the next day, Edgar was confused and his speech was slurred. He was taken to the emergency room where a doctor examined him. It turns out Edgar had hypothermia.

Almost everyone knows about winter dangers for older people such as broken bones from falling on the ice or breathing problems caused by cold air. But, not everyone knows that cold weather can also lower the temperature inside your body. This drop in body temperature is called *hypothermia* (hi-po-ther-mee-uh), and it can be deadly if not treated

quickly. Hypothermia can happen anywhere—not just outside and not just in northern states. In fact, some older people can have a mild form of hypothermia if the temperature in their home is too cool.

What Are the Signs of Hypothermia?

When you think about being cold, you probably think of shivering. That is one way the body stays warm when it gets cold. But, shivering alone does not mean you have hypothermia.

How do you know if someone has hypothermia? Look for the “*umbles*”—*stumbles, mumbles, fumbles, and grumbles*—these show that the cold is a problem. Check for:

- ◆ Confusion or sleepiness
- ◆ Slowed, slurred speech, or shallow breathing
- ◆ Weak pulse
- ◆ Change in behavior or in the way a person looks
- ◆ A lot of shivering or no shivering; stiffness in the arms or legs
- ◆ Poor control over body movements or slow reactions

Taking Action

A normal body temperature is 98.6°F. A few degrees lower, for example, 95°F, can be dangerous. It may cause an irregular heartbeat leading to heart problems and death.

If you think someone could have hypothermia, use a thermometer to take his or her temperature. Make sure you shake the thermometer so it starts below its lowest point. When you take the temperature, if the reading doesn't rise above 96°F, call for emergency help. In many areas, that means calling 911.

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.

While you are waiting for help to arrive, keep the person warm and dry. Try and move him or her to a warmer place. Wrap the person in blankets, towels, 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 alcohol or caffeinated drinks, like regular coffee.

How Do I Stay Safe?

- ◆ Try to stay away from cold places. Changes in your body that come with aging can make it harder for you to be aware of getting cold.
- ◆ You may not always be able to warm yourself. Pay attention to how cold it is where you are.
- ◆ Check the weather forecasts for windy and cold weather. Try to stay inside or in a warm place on cold and windy days. If you have to go out, wear warm clothes including a hat and gloves. A waterproof coat or jacket can help you stay warm if it's cold and snowy.
- ◆ Wear several layers of loose clothing when it's cold. The layers will trap warm air between them. Don't wear tight clothing because it can keep your blood from flowing freely. This can lead to loss of body heat.
- ◆ Ask your doctor how the medicines you are taking affect body heat. Some medicines used by older people can increase the risk of accidental hypothermia. These include drugs used to treat anxiety, depression, or nausea. Some over-the-counter cold remedies can also cause problems.

- ◆ When the temperature has dropped, drink alcohol moderately, if at all. Alcoholic drinks can make you lose body heat.
- ◆ 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.

Health Problems

Some illnesses may make it harder for your body to stay warm. These include problems with your body's hormone system such as low thyroid hormone (hypothyroidism), health problems that keep blood from flowing normally (like diabetes), and some skin problems where your body loses more heat than normal.

Some health problems may make it hard for you to put on more clothes, use a blanket, or get out of the cold. For example:

- ◆ Severe arthritis, Parkinson's disease, or other illnesses that make it tough to move around
- ◆ Stroke or other illnesses that can leave you paralyzed and may make clear thinking more difficult
- ◆ Memory loss
- ◆ A fall or other injury

Staying Warm Inside

Being in a cold building can also cause hypothermia. In fact, hypothermia can happen to someone in a nursing home or group facility if the rooms are not kept warm enough. People who are already sick may have special problems keeping warm. If someone you know is in a group facility, pay attention to the inside temperature and to whether that person is dressed warmly enough.

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. For some people, this temperature can contribute to hypothermia. 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. Set your thermostat for at least 68°F to 70°F. 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, but here are a few things to keep in mind:

- ◆ Make sure your space heater has been approved by a recognized testing laboratory.
- ◆ Choose the right size heater for the space you are heating.
- ◆ Put the heater on a flat, level surface that will not burn.
- ◆ Keep children and pets away from the heating element.
- ◆ Keep things that can catch fire like paint, clothing, bedding, curtains, and papers away from the heating element.
- ◆ If your heater has a flame, keep a window open at least 1 inch and doors open to the rest of your home for good air flow.
- ◆ Turn the heater off when you leave the room or go to bed.
- ◆ Make sure your smoke alarms are working.
- ◆ Put a carbon monoxide detector near where people sleep.
- ◆ Keep an approved fire extinguisher nearby.

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. 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 the heating bills down. You might also think about only heating the rooms you use in the house. For example, shut the heating vents and doors to any bedrooms not being used. Also, keep the basement door closed.

If you have a limited income, you may qualify for help paying your heating bill. State and local energy agencies, or gas and electric companies, may have special programs. Another possible source of help is the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. This program helps some people with limited incomes who need help paying their heating and cooling bills. Your local Area Agency on Aging, senior center, or community action agency may have information on these programs.

Plan ahead for the cold weather. Make sure your furnace is working, and you have a warm coat, hat, and gloves in the closet. If necessary, get help with shoveling the ice or snow. Being prepared will help ensure a safe and warm winter.

For More Information

Here are some helpful resources:

Consumer Product Safety Commission

4330 East West Highway
Bethesda, MD 20814
1-800-638-2772 (toll-free)
1-301-595-7054 (TTY)
www.cpsc.gov

Eldercare Locator

1-800-677-1116 (toll-free)
www.eldercare.gov

Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program

National Energy Assistance Referral
Hotline (NEAR)
1-866-674-6327 (toll-free)
www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/liheap

National Association of Area Agencies on Aging

1730 Rhode Island Avenue, NW
Suite 1200
Washington, DC 20036
1-202-872-0888
www.naa.org

For more information on health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)
1-800-222-4225 (toll-free/TTY)
www.nia.nih.gov
www.nia.nih.gov/Espanol

To sign up for regular email alerts about new publications and other information from NIA, go to www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation.

Visit NIHSeniorHealth (www.nihseniorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.



National Institute on Aging

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