

## **Cold Weather Safety Tips**

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Winter's beauty and refreshing cool air bring with them the challenge of keeping warm. Being too cold for too long can make you vulnerable to hypothermia, a dangerous drop in core body temperature.

Hypothermia is not only dangerous, it can be fatal if not detected immediately and treated properly.

Each year, about 37 people in New York State, and nearly 700 people in the United States, die of this condition. Those most at risk are infants, older adults, people who are ill, and those who work or play outdoors. It may occur in any climate and is common among older people who live in homes that are too cold for their comfort.

Hypothermia occurs when a person's body temperature drops below normal – to 95 degrees Fahrenheit or less – and impairs normal muscle and mental functions. This condition may take a few days or several weeks to develop. Temperatures as mild as 60 to 65 degrees can cause hypothermia.

Shivering is the body's first sign that it is struggling to keep warm. As your body temperature continues to drop, you may not be aware of the cold. Hypothermia can deprive you of judgment and reasoning power, because the cold affects the brain.

Signs of hypothermia include:

- Confusion
- Clumsiness
- Forgetfulness
- Drowsiness
- Slurred speech
- A change in appearance, such as a puffy face
- Weak pulse
- Slow heartbeat
- Very slow, shallow breathing
- Coma or death-like appearance, if the body temperature drops to or below 86 degrees

If you notice these signs in a person, take his or her temperature. If it is 95 degrees or below, wrap the individual in a blanket. Take him or her to a health care provider or a hospital, or call an ambulance. Do not treat hypothermia at home. You may give the person small amounts of food or drink if he or she is alert. Do not offer alcoholic beverages, and do not give him or her a hot shower or bath. It could cause shock.

Older people make less body heat, because they have slower metabolisms and engage in less physical activity. People over 65 years of age should set their homes' thermostats no lower than 65 degrees.

Set the thermostat in your child's room between 65 and 70 degrees. Children should not sleep in cold rooms. To keep your baby warm without covers, dress him or her in a blanket sleeper in cold weather.

To reduce your risk of getting frostbite or hypothermia follow these cold weather safety tips:

- Dress in layers of clothing. Be sure the outer layer of your clothing is tightly woven, preferably wind resistant, to reduce body-heat loss caused by wind. Wool, silk, or polypropylene inner layers of clothing will hold more body heat than cotton.
- Wear a hat or head covering. Most of our body's heat, 90%, is lost through our heads.
- Wear mittens instead of gloves.
- Cover ears with scarf or earmuffs.
- Cover your face with a scarf.
- Wear winter boots that are water repellent and warm socks.
- Stay dry—wet clothing chills the body rapidly. Excess perspiration will increase heat loss, so remove extra layers of clothing whenever you feel too warm.
- Do not ignore shivering. It is an important first sign that the body is losing heat and an indication that you should go indoors.

For more information about hypothermia, contact the Broome County Health Department at 778-3944.