

Health for the Whole Family
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WINTER BRINGS CHANCE OF HYPOTHERMIA

Along with winter's cozy sweaters, steaming cups of cocoa, and beautiful snow-covered scenes, comes significantly lower temperatures. For some, staying safe and warm through the winter months can be a challenge and even result in a serious, life-threatening health problem related to prolonged exposure to the cold, known as hypothermia.

When exposed to cold temperatures, whether indoors or outside, your body begins to lose heat faster than it is produced. This prolonged exposure to cold will eventually use up your body's stored energy and result in a lower than normal core body temperature, or hypothermia.

Hypothermia is especially dangerous once a person's body temperature drops below 95 degrees Fahrenheit because organs like the heart and brain begin to be affected. This can cause a person to not think clearly or be able to move well. The victim may not even know it is happening or be aware that they need help, and they often won't do anything about it.

A body temperature below 90 degrees is life threatening, and when it drops to 86 degrees or lower, a person may slip into a coma and appear dead, with no signs of breathing or a pulse.

Everyone is susceptible to hypothermia, but the elderly, infants, and people without shelter or who live in poorly insulated or unheated homes, are especially at risk. The elderly are particularly at risk because of decreased total body fat and the inability to adjust to changes in temperature as quickly. They may be unaware that they are gradually getting colder and therefore not take the needed precautions to avoid hypothermia.

Hypothermia can develop over a time span of anywhere from a few days to several weeks, and even mildly cool indoor temperatures of 60 to 65 degrees can trigger it. Alcohol is frequently involved as well. Alcohol dilates (opens up) blood vessels beneath the skin, which can create a misleading sensation of warmth even as body heat escapes more rapidly.

Warning signs of hypothermia include:

- shivering, exhaustion
- confusion, memory loss, slurred speech
- weak pulse, slow heartbeat
- very slow and shallow breathing

Infants experiencing hypothermia will have bright red, cold skin and very low energy.

If you notice any of these signs, take the person's temperature. If it is below 95 degrees, the situation is an emergency and medical attention should be sought immediately. Until medical care is available, follow these steps to prevent further heat loss:

- Remove any wet clothes and wrap the victim in a warm blanket.
- Warm the center of the body first by applying an electric heating pad (set on low) or a hot water bottle to the person's stomach and chest.
- If the victim is adequately alert, give small quantities of warm food or drink.

It is not recommended to put the victim in a hot shower or bath, as that may cause an unsafe drop in blood pressure and worsen the situation.

A person with severe hypothermia may be unconscious and not seem to be breathing or have a pulse. However, many unconscious hypothermia victims have made complete recoveries once rewarmed, so it is important to administer appropriate resuscitation, like CPR, and warming techniques, until the person is transported to the hospital.

Keep yourself and family safe this winter by dressing in warm layers and changing out of wet clothes promptly to prevent hypothermia. If you must go out in wet, windy weather, dress appropriately to stay dry and avoid losing body heat. In the homes of infants and the elderly, keep the temperature at least 70 degrees, especially in the sleeping area, and check on them regularly. Following these simple measures will help everyone stay healthy and warm during the cold months of winter.

Preventive medicine is just one aspect of care osteopathic physicians (DOs) provide. DOs are fully-licensed to prescribe medicine and practice in all specialty areas including surgery. DOs are trained

to consider the health of the whole person and use their hands to help diagnose and treat their patients.

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