

Cold Weather Considerations: Frostbite & Hypothermia

Now that we are in the cold grip of the winter season, we need to remember that with the cold temperatures, we need to take extra precautions to prevent serious health problems. The two most common cold-related problems for us mortal creatures is frostbite and hypothermia (a drop in the body's internal core temperature). Frostbite, simply put, is freezing of the skin. The nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers or toes are the most often affected. It can lead to permanent damage, or in severe cases, amputation. The risk of frostbite is increased in people with reduced blood circulation, or those who are improperly dressed for the cold temperatures. Because frostbite causes numbness to the area affected, the victim is often the last to know, and finds out only after someone else points it out to them. At the first signs of redness or pain in any skin area, get out of the cold or protect any exposed skin. This may be the first indication of frostbite..

Any of the following signs may indicate frostbite and require medical care:

- a white or grayish-yellow skin area
- skin that feels unusually firm or waxy
- numbness

What should you do for frostbite?

- Never rub or massage, but do use your armpits, a warm companion, warm drinks, and warm clothes to thaw your frozen body parts. Remove rings, watches, and anything that is tight. Your goal is to get indoors as quickly as possible, without walking on a frostbitten foot if you can avoid it.
- Once indoors, get in a warm (not hot) bath and wrap your face and ears in a moist, warm (not hot) towel. Don't get near a hot stove or heater, and don't use a heating pad, a hot water bottle, or a hair dryer. You may burn yourself before your feeling returns.
- Your frostbitten skin will become red and swollen, and you'll feel like it's on fire. You may develop blisters. Don't break the blisters. It could cause scarring.
- If your skin is blue or gray, very swollen, blistered, or feels hard and numb even under the surface, go to a hospital immediately.
- Do not rub the frostbitten area with snow or massage it at all. This can cause more damage.
- Don't use a heating pad, heat lamp or the heat of a stove, fireplace, or radiator for warming. Affected areas are numb and can be easily burned.

Because frostbite and hypothermia both result from cold exposure, it is important to determine whether the victim also shows signs of hypothermia. Hypothermia is a more serious medical condition and requires immediate emergency medical assistance. When exposed to cold temperatures, your body begins to lose heat faster than it can be produced. Prolonged exposure to cold will eventually use up your body's stored energy. The result is hypothermia, or abnormally low body temperature. Body temperature that is too low affects the brain, making the victim unable to think clearly or move well. This makes hypothermia particularly dangerous because a person may not know it is happening and won't be able to do anything about it. Although hypothermia is usually

associated with very cold temperatures, it can occur even at cool temperatures (above 40°F) if a person becomes chilled from rain, sweat, or submersion in cold water.

Some of the warning signs of hypothermia include:

- shivering / exhaustion
- confusion / fumbling hands
- memory loss / slurred speech
- drowsiness
- In infants, it may be bright red, cold skin and very low energy

What should you do for hypothermia?

Get medical attention immediately. If medical care is not available, begin warming the person, as follows:

- Get the victim into a warm room or shelter.
- If the victim has on any wet clothing, remove it.
- Warm the center of the body first -- chest, neck, head, and groin -- using an electric blanket, if available. Or use skin-to-skin contact under loose, dry layers of blankets, clothing, towels, or sheets.
- Warm beverages can help increase the body temperature, but do not give alcoholic beverages.
- Do not try to give beverages to an unconscious person.
- After body temperature has increased, keep the person dry and wrapped in a warm blanket, including the head and neck.
- Get medical attention as soon as possible.

The cold, hard facts are we should make sure we, and the kids, are dressed appropriately for the weather conditions. Take into account the wind chill factor. Wearing layers of clothing is best. Remember also that elderly people are more prone to hypothermia, so take extra precautions to limit outside time and/or assure proper clothing is worn. Use common sense, and look for these serious, yet preventable, cold weather health conditions during these winter months.