

Doctor's Bag



by Robert Sorrenti, MD
Chief Medical Officer

HYPOTHERMIA AND OLDER ADULTS

Winter can be especially dangerous for the elderly. Health, nutrition and lifestyle factors can cause older adults to be more vulnerable to the cold weather.

Medical conditions such as diabetes or stroke – as well as prescription drugs for conditions such as high blood pressure, nervousness, depression and sleeping disorders – can increase the risk of hypothermia.

Poor nutrition is another culprit. Food provides the fuel the body needs to keep warm. For older adults, hot, nourishing meals and plenty of warm fluids are essential to maintaining a safe body temperature.

Lifestyle factors can also determine risk. Alcohol can increase the rate of body heat loss, and should be avoided. Room temperatures of at least 68-70° and proper attire – both inside and outside of the home – are important safety measures.

Seniors often have a hard time staying warm or even being able to identify discomfort caused by cold. If your friend, neighbor or loved one is an older adult, check in often during the winter. Encourage them to consult their personal doctors if they have trouble keeping warm or have concerns about medications or other health issues.

HLInfo YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO HEALTH CARE AWARENESS

Baby It's Cold Outside!

What is Hypothermia?

According to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control), "When exposed to cold temperatures, the body begins to lose heat faster than it can be produced. Prolonged exposure to cold will eventually use up the body's stored energy. The result is hypothermia, or abnormally low body temperature."



Who is at Risk?

Age, health and lifestyle play key roles in determining one's risk of hypothermia. In general, victims of hypothermia usually include:

- Elderly people with inadequate food, clothing or heating;
- Babies sleeping in cold rooms;
- People who remain outdoors for long periods – the homeless, hikers, hunters, etc.; and
- People who drink alcohol or use illicit drugs.

Certain medical conditions and medications can also increase the risk of hypothermia. As always, it is a good idea to consult your family doctor if you have questions or concerns.

What are the Warning Signs of Hypothermia?

Warning signs for adults include: shivering, exhaustion, confusion, fumbling hands, memory loss, slurred speech and drowsiness. Warning signs for infants include bright red, cold skin and very low energy.

How is Hypothermia Treated?

Hypothermia is best treated by a medical professional. If help is not immediately available, begin warming the person, as follows:

- Move the victim to a warm room or shelter.
- Remove any wet clothing.
- 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.
- Have the victim drink warm beverages (not alcohol) if he or she is conscious.
- After the body temperature has increased, keep the person dry and wrapped in a warm blanket, including the head and neck.
- A person with severe hypothermia may be unconscious and may not seem to have a pulse or be breathing. Even if the victim appears to be dead, CPR should be provided and should continue while the victim is being warmed. In some cases, hypothermia victims who appear to be dead can be successfully resuscitated.

DidUKnow?

- Hypothermia is most likely at very cold temperatures but it can occur even at cool temperatures (above 40°F) if a person becomes chilled from rain, sweat or submersion in cold water.
- One of the most dangerous things about hypothermia is that it causes the mind to become confused, making it difficult to recognize the problem and seek help.
- Many older adults die in their homes without medical attention because friends and family do not recognize the symptoms of hypothermia.
- Immediate medical attention is necessary if the body temperature drops below 95°.

Newsletter Information Sources

"Winter Weather: Hypothermia," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov, December 7, 2007

"Hypothermia Facts," by Catie Hayes, safety.com, retrieved January 14, 2009

"A Message for Older Adults – Cold Weather Spells Danger", Center for Environmental Physiology in Cooperation with the Administration on Aging and the Older Americans Volunteer Programs/Action, www.cityofboston.gov/snow, retrieved January 14, 2009