



Surviving the Cold Weather

Prolonged exposure to low temperatures, wind and/or moisture can result in cold-related injury from frostbite and hypothermia. Here are some suggestions on how to keep warm and avoid frostbite and hypothermia.

Dress properly

Wear several layers of clothing to insulate your body by trapping warm, dry air inside. Wool and polypropylene best trap air and do not retain moisture. Choose a coat with a wind and waterproof outer layer.

The head and neck lose heat faster than any other part of the body. Your cheeks, ears and nose are the most prone to frostbite. Wear a hat, scarf and turtleneck sweater to protect these areas.

Frostbite: What to look for

The extent of frostbite is difficult to judge until hours after thawing. There are two classifications of frostbite:

- Superficial frostbite is characterized by white, waxy or grayish-yellow patches on the affected areas. The skin feels cold and numb. The skin surface feels stiff and underlying tissue feels soft when depressed.
- Deep frostbite is characterized by waxy and pale skin. The affected parts feel cold, hard, and solid and cannot be depressed. Large blisters may appear after rewarming.

What to do

- Get the victim out of the cold and to a warm place immediately.
- Remove any constrictive clothing items and jewelry that could impair circulation.
- If you notice signs of frostbite, seek medical attention immediately.
- Place dry, sterile gauze between toes and fingers to absorb moisture and to keep them from sticking together.
- Slightly elevate the affected part to reduce pain and swelling.
- If you are more than one hour from a medical facility and only if refreezing can be prevented, then frostbite can be rewarmed by immersing the area in lukewarm, not hot water (100 to 105 degrees Fahrenheit). If you do not have a thermometer, test the water first to see if it is warm. Rewarming usually takes 20 to 45 minutes or until tissues soften.

What not to do

- Do not use water hotter than 105 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Do not use water colder than 100 degrees Fahrenheit since it will not thaw frostbite quickly enough.
- Do not rub or massage the frostbite area.
- Do not rub with ice or snow.
- Do not apply a heat source to frostbitten skin.

Hypothermia

Hypothermia occurs when the body loses more heat than it produces. Symptoms include change in mental status, uncontrollable shivering, cool abdomen and a low core body temperature. Severe hypothermia may cause rigid muscles, dark and puffy skin, irregular heartbeat and respiration, and unconsciousness.

Treat hypothermia by protecting the victim from further heat loss and seeking immediate medical attention. Get the victim out of the cold. Add insulation such as blankets, pillows, towels or newspapers beneath and around the victim. Be sure to cover the victim's head. Replace wet clothing with dry clothing. Handle the victim gently because rough handling can cause cardiac arrest. Keep the victim in a horizontal (flat) position.

Finally, the best way to avoid frostbite and hypothermia is to stay out of the cold. Read a book, clean house or watch TV. Be patient and wait out the dangerous cold weather.