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Hypothermia Is A Cold-Weather Risk Both Indoors and Outdoors

Unlike last year, this winter has brought colder than normal temperatures and plenty of snow. With nearly two months of winter remaining, it is wise to keep in mind the dangers to health and safety that accompany below-freezing temperatures.

One of the most serious concerns associated with winter weather is hypothermia. Hypothermia occurs when the core body temperature drops to a dangerously low level. It can be the result of prolonged exposure to cold temperatures outdoors, being immersed in a cold body of water, or even living in inadequately heated quarters. This last condition, also known as accidental hypothermia, is of particular concern for people at risk who are exposed to temperatures below 65°F. for extended periods of time without adequate protection. People at risk for developing this type of hypothermia include the elderly, infants, and those with certain medical conditions.

Infants, having less body mass, are at risk simply because they can not yet maintain body heat the way an older child or an adult can. Certain medical conditions, such as arthritis, circulatory problems, and respiratory diseases make exercise and activity difficult, thereby reducing the amount of body heat generated by the muscles. Such conditions are often associated with the development of hypothermia. And age itself can be a contributing factor--as we grow older, our metabolic rate tends to decrease and the body's ability to balance the processes of heat production and heat loss becomes less efficient. Also, the use of certain medications, alcohol, or drugs can affect the body's ability to regulate temperature and can predispose an individual to the risk of hypothermia.

In addition to the physiological factors that increase the likelihood of the development of this condition, social norms and practices also play a role. People trying to conserve energy or reduce heating costs may turn their thermostats down too low in their homes. Those with low incomes may have difficulty paying heating bills, dressing warmly, and paying for winterization of their homes. They are also at greater risk of malnutrition, another factor related to the onset of hypothermia. Living alone, with no one to regularly check on your well-being, also increases the risk.

Because it can be a life-threatening condition and so many factors can contribute to the development of hypothermia, it is important to know and recognize its symptoms, how to prevent it, and how to respond when hypothermia is suspected. Symptoms include sleepiness, glassy eyes, slow breathing, listlessness, confusion, slurred speech, slow pulse rate, paleness and rigid muscles. Violent shivering may occur in the early stages, and then disappear later. As the condition progresses, unconsciousness, convulsions, or paralysis may occur. Although most of us associate shivering with being cold, hypothermia inhibits the ability to shiver; in fact, people suffering from hypothermia may not even be aware that they are cold. Left untreated, hypothermia can lead to

cardiac arrest and death.

If hypothermia is suspected, immediate medical attention is required. While awaiting the arrival of medical assistance, bystanders can help by covering the person with blankets. Those who want to assist should avoid

the temptation to rub the arms, hands, legs, or feet, because heating the extremities first can draw circulation away from the body's core and lead to heart problems.

As is always the case, preventing the occurrence of hypothermia is better than having to treat the condition. A few simple precautions should be taken by anyone at risk, whether the cold exposure is likely to occur indoors or outdoors:

- Dress warmly and in layers. Layers provide extra insulation by warming the trapped air between the clothes.
- Cover your hands, feet, and head, even when going to bed.
- Avoid wearing tight clothing and shoes to permit proper circulation of the blood.
- Avoid the use of alcohol and tobacco as they can interfere with blood circulation.
- Be active. Move around periodically to increase circulation.
- Eat warm, well-balanced meals and drink warm liquids.
- When indoors, set the thermostat at 65^o F. or higher; people with certain medical conditions that cause them to lead more sedentary lives may require settings of at least 68-70^oF. or higher.

Remember, injuries from cold exposure can be prevented by dressing appropriately for conditions, eating a well-balanced diet, avoiding the use of alcohol and tobacco, and drinking plenty of fluids. If you have a neighbor or relative who lives alone, you can help by calling them regularly to be sure they are alright. For further information about hypothermia or any other public health concern, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at 721-2822 (www.ccthd.org)

