

## ***Winter Safety Tips for Older Adults***

**When the temperature drops, older adults run a high risk of health problems related to the cold—here's what you need to know to protect yourself, or older loved ones:**

### **Hypothermia:**

Hypothermia is a deadly drop in body temperature when exposed to very cold temperatures. Because of the way our bodies change as we age, it is harder for older adults to tell when their body temperature is too low. This can be dangerous because your body, when outside in the cold, begins to lose heat very quickly.

Here's what you should do to protect yourself:

- Stay indoors when it's very cold outside, especially if it's also very windy; and keep indoor temperatures at 65 degrees or warmer.
- If you have to go outside, don't stay out in the cold or the wind for very long.
- Wear two or three thinner layers of loose-fitting clothing. (This is warmer than a single layer of thick clothing.)
- Always wear:
  - A hat,
  - Gloves or mittens (mittens are warmer),
  - A coat and boots, and
  - A scarf to cover your mouth and nose and protect your lungs from very cold air.
- Stay dry; wet clothing chills your body quickly.
- Go indoors if you start shivering— this is a warning sign that you are losing body heat.

*Know the warning signs of hypothermia:*

- Lots of shivering;
- Cold skin that is pale or lighter in color;
- Feeling very tired, confused and sleepy;
- Feeling weak;
- Problems walking,
- Slowed breathing or heart rate.

Note: Don't rely on shivering alone as a warning sign, since older people tend to shiver less—and some, not at all—as their body temperature drops. Call 911 if you think you or someone else has hypothermia.

### **Frostbite:**

Frostbite is damage to the skin caused by exposure to very cold temperatures for extended lengths of time. This damage can go all the way down to the bone. Frostbite usually affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers and toes. In very bad cases, toes or fingers or even limbs may be lost. People with heart disease and other circulation problems are more likely to get frostbite.

To protect against frostbite:

- Cover up all parts of your body when you go outside.
- If your skin turns red or dark or starts hurting, go inside right away.

*Know the telltale signs of frostbite:*


- Skin that's white or lighter in color,
- Skin that feels hard or waxy;
- Numbness.

If you think you or someone else has frostbite, call for medical help immediately. A person with frostbite may also have hypothermia, so check for those symptoms, too (see above).

**Falls:**

It's very easy to slip and fall in the winter.

To protect yourself from a fall:

-  Hire someone to shovel your steps and sidewalk for you. Many communities have volunteers that will do this for free. Check your senior center, churches or other community centers for assistance.
- Do not walk on icy or snowy sidewalks; look for sidewalks that are dry and have been cleared.
- Wear boots with non-skid soles so you do not slip when you walk.
- If you use a cane or a walker, replace the rubber tip(s) before it is worn smooth. You might also buy an ice pick-like attachment that fits onto the end of the cane or walker, to help keep you from slipping in snowy or icy conditions. (You can find these at medical supply stores.)

**Fires and carbon monoxide poisoning:**

Burning wood, natural gas, kerosene and other fuels produces a gas that you cannot see or smell, called carbon monoxide. Unless fireplaces, wood and gas stoves and gas appliances are properly vented, cleaned, and used, they can leak dangerous amounts of carbon monoxide into your home. These and other appliances, such as kerosene and electric heaters, can also be fire hazards.

You should:

- Have your fireplace and wood stove chimneys and flues inspected every year, and cleaned when necessary. (Ask your local fire department to recommend an inspector or look in the telephone book under "chimney cleaning".)
- Put a smoke detector and battery-operated carbon monoxide detector in areas where you use fireplaces, wood stoves, or kerosene heaters.
- Open a window—just a crack will do—when using a kerosene stove. This allows the gas to escape and prevents it from building up in your house.
- Make sure space heaters are at least three feet away from anything that might catch fire, such as curtains, bedding and furniture.
- Keep a fire extinguisher that can be used for a variety of types of fires, including chemical fires, in areas where you use fireplaces, wood stoves and kerosene heaters.
- Never try to heat your home using a gas stove, charcoal grill, or other stove not made for heating a home.

