



**State of Minnesota**  
**The Office of Ombudsman for**  
**Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities**  
**WINTER ALERT**



This Medical Alert is based on the work of the Office of Ombudsman for Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Medical Review Subcommittee and should be posted prominently. The Office of Ombudsman for Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities works to improve the services provided to people with disabilities by communicating important information found in the Medical Review Subcommittee's reviews of deaths and serious injuries. Thank you for promptly reporting deaths and serious injuries. You are helping us to meet our mission.

**Have a Plan or Policy and Make Sure All Staff Know the Plan**

- Establish a marker wind chill temperature when everyone stays indoors. Use the NWS Wind Chill Chart for guidance at [National Weather Service Wind Chill Chart](#)
- Know when to suspend any travel. Is the travel necessary?
- Have a plan about what to do if stranded away from home in adverse weather. Discuss the plan with both staff and clients.

**Get Ready For Winter**

- Stock extra batteries for radios and flashlights.
- Install a UL-approved carbon monoxide (CO) detector in your home and facilities, which will sound an alarm when unsafe levels of CO are present.
- Have all fuel-burning appliances safety checked in the fall. This will not only reduce the risk of CO poisoning, it will also promote energy efficiency.
- Make sure smoke detectors are installed and working. Check all fire extinguishers to make sure they are ready to be used.
- Try to avoid using space or portable heaters. They can create a fire hazard.

**Keep Sidewalks Clear Of Ice and Snow**

- Keep handy a supply of salt, sand, or cat litter.
- Make sure that there is snow removal equipment available.
- Pay special attention to stairs, porches and areas where clients are getting in and out of vehicles.
- Heart attacks are a major cause of death during and after winter storms. Shoveling snow or freeing stuck vehicles can be extremely hard work. Don't overdo it; pace yourself and get help.

**Communicable Diseases**

- Get a flu shot.
- Don't share drinking glasses and cups.
- Encourage careful and frequent hand washing. "Hand Washing is the single most important means of preventing the spread of infection"- CDC. For more information go to [MN Department of Health Hand Hygiene Link](#)
- Regularly clean and disinfect articles touched by many people such as phones, doorknobs, and faucets. Provide disposable paper tissues and a proper place to dispose of them.
- Consider using the "Cover Your Cough" poster from MDH for staff and client training:  
<http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/dtopics/infectioncontrol/cover/gen/cycpgeneng.pdf>

## Hypothermia and Frostbite

- Hypothermia and frostbite can quickly become life and limb threatening. See the other Alerts for more details.
- The very old, the very young and persons who are in poor health are most at risk.

## Stay Off of Thin Ice

- Stay away from ice-covered ponds and streams.
- Many persons have died when they fell through ice they thought was safe. Lake ice should be at least four inches thick before it is walked on. See <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/safety/ice/thickness.html> for more information on ice thickness and for a Danger! Thin Ice brochure: [http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/education\\_safety/safety/ice/dangerthinice.pdf](http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/education_safety/safety/ice/dangerthinice.pdf)

## Winter Travel

- Know what the weather forecast is. Before travel contact the Minnesota Department of Transportation for road conditions. You can call 511 from any phone, including mobile phones, or visit [www.511mn.org](http://www.511mn.org)
- Keep a winter survival kit. A metal container, like a three-pound coffee can, can hold candle stubs and matches which can be used to melt snow for additional drinking water. It can also be packed with high calorie food.
- Keep a HELP sign in your car along with an extra blanket, boots, cap, and mittens. For more suggestions go to: <https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/hsem/weather-awareness-preparedness/Documents/Winter%20Survival%20Kits%20For%20Your%20Vehicle.pdf>
- If your vehicle becomes stranded, stay with it until help arrives. Do not try to walk for help during a blizzard.
- Keep your car “winterized” with fresh antifreeze, winter weight oil, and a tune up. Use snow tires.
- Carry a cell phone with you if possible.
- **Always use your seat belt!**

## Recreational Hazards

- Every winter we get a number of serious injuries reported that have been the result of snow sliding. Make sure the path is clear of any obstacles and then have fun.
- If snowmobiles are used, make sure the operator knows, understands, and uses good safety practices.

## Additional Winter Safety Tips

In addition to the tips offered by The Office of Ombudsman for Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities, you may wish to review the information available at the website of the Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, a Division of the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, under “Winter Weather: Are You Ready for Winter?”

<https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/hsem/weather-awareness-preparedness/Pages/winter-weather.aspx>

Topics include Winter Storms, Outdoor Winter Safety, Winter Fire Safety, Indoor Winter Safety and Winter Driving.