

"Giving Voice to Those Seldom Heard"

Hypothermia 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 the agency's mission.

Hypothermia occurs when the body's core temperature drops below 95 degrees Fahrenheit or 35 degrees Celsius. This happens when the rate of heat loss exceeds the rate of heat production. Hypothermia can occur in either indoor or outdoor situations. It quickly can become life threatening.

Prevention

Review the accompanying wind chill chart and stay inside when there are dangerous wind chills.

Wear wind-proof, water resistant, layers of clothing; wear mittens (not gloves), wear a scarf and hat that cover the ears to prevent frostbite.

Stay dry.

People most likely to experience hypothermia include:

- Very old or very young
- Chronically ill, especially with heart or circulation problems
- Malnourished
- Overly tired
- Taking certain prescription medications such as phenothiazines and barbiturates that can prevent normal body responses to cold temperatures.
- Under the influence of alcohol or drugs

Conditions Leading To Hypothermia

Hypothermia occurs when more heat is lost than the body can make. In most cases, it occurs after long periods in the cold.

Common causes include:

- Being outside without enough protective clothing in winter
- Falling into cold water of a lake, river, or other body of water
- Wearing wet clothing in windy or cold weather
- Heavy exertion, not drinking enough fluids, or not eating enough in cold weather

What to Look For

As a person develops hypothermia, they slowly lose the ability to think and move. In fact, they may even be unaware that they need emergency treatment. Someone with hypothermia also is likely to have frostbite.

The symptoms of hypothermia include:

- Drowsiness
- Weakness and loss of coordination
- Pale and cold skin
- Confusion – watch for the “-umbles” – stumbles, mumbles, fumbles, and grumbles
- Uncontrollable shivering (although at extremely low body temperatures, shivering may stop)
- Slowed breathing or heart rate

Lethargy, cardiac arrest, shock, and coma can set in without prompt treatment. Hypothermia can be fatal.

What to Do

Call 911 anytime you suspect someone has hypothermia. Give first aid while waiting for emergency help.

Take the following steps if you think someone has hypothermia:

1. If the person has any symptoms of hypothermia, especially confusion or problems thinking, **call 911 right away.**
2. If the person is unconscious, check airway, breathing, and circulation. If necessary, begin rescue breathing or CPR. If the victim is breathing fewer than 6 breaths per minute, begin rescue breathing.
3. Take the person indoors and cover with warm blankets. If going indoors is not possible, get the person out of the wind and use a blanket to provide insulation from the cold ground. Cover the person's head and neck to help retain body heat.
4. Once inside, remove any wet or tight clothes and replace them with dry clothing.
5. Warm the person. If necessary, use your own body heat to aid the warming. Apply warm compresses to the neck, chest wall, and groin. If the person is alert and can easily swallow, give warm, sweetened, nonalcoholic fluids to aid the warming.
6. Stay with the person until medical help arrives.

Do NOT assume that someone found lying motionless in the cold is already dead.

Do NOT use direct heat (such as hot water, a heating pad, or a heat lamp) to warm the person.

Do NOT give the person alcohol.

Additional information is available at [Hypothermia: MedlinePlus](https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000038.htm) (<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000038.htm>)