



Genesee County Health Department

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RE: Protect Yourself From Extreme Cold

Last winter Genesee County experienced near record low temperatures and snowfalls. Extremely low temperatures can last for days or weeks, wind chill factors and high winds can make it feel even worse. Exposure to cold temperatures, whether indoors or outdoors, can cause serious or life threatening health problems. It is important to review health and safety information before extreme cold and heavy snowfall occurs.

Prevention is the best defense against having to deal with extreme cold-weather conditions. Serious health problems can result from prolonged exposure to the cold. The most common cold-related problems are hypothermia and frostbite. By preparing yourself in advance for winter emergencies and by observing safety precautions during times of extremely cold weather, you can reduce the risk of these weather-related health problems. The following tips are important for those cold to extremely cold winter days.

- Hypothermia or abnormally low body temperature occurs when your body is exposed to very cold temperatures and it begins to lose heat faster than it can be produced. Prolonged exposure to cold will eventually use up your body's stored energy. Hypothermia can occur even at cool temperatures (above 40 degrees Fahrenheit) if a person becomes chilled from rain, sweat, or submersion in cold water.

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Better Life Through Better Health

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Victims of hypothermia are most often (1) elderly people (2) babies sleeping in cold bedrooms and (3) homeless persons, bikers and hunters, etc.

- Hypothermia in adults can appear as shivering, confusion, memory loss, fumbling hands or slurred speech. In infants, the child may appear bright red, having cold skin and very low energy. If any of these signs appear, take the person's temperature. If it's below 95 degrees Fahrenheit, the situation is an emergency – get medical attention immediately. If medical care is not available, begin warming the person as follows:
 - Get the victim into a warm room or shelter
 - Remove any wet clothing on the victim
 - Warm the center of the body first-chest, neck, head and groin-using an electric blanket, if available, or use skin to skin contact under loose, dry layers of blankets, clothing, towels, or sheets.
 - Warm beverages can help increase the body temperature, but do not give alcoholic beverages. Do not try to give beverages to an unconscious person.
 - After body temperature has increased, keep the person dry and wrapped in a warm blanket, including the head and neck.
 - Get medical attention as soon as possible
- Frostbite is an injury to the body that is caused by freezing and causes a loss of feeling and color in affected areas. It most often affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers, or toes. It can permanently damage the body and severe cases can lead to amputation.

At the first signs of redness or pain in any skin area, get out of the cold or protect any exposed skin.

Any of the following signs may indicate frostbite:

- A white or grayish-yellow skin area
- Skin that feels unusually firm or waxy
- Numbness

A victim is often unaware of frostbite until someone else points it out because the frozen tissues are numb. If you detect symptoms of frostbite, seek medical care. Since frostbite and hypothermia both result from exposure, first determine whether the victim also shows signs of hypothermia. If there is frostbite, but no sign of hypothermia, and immediate medical care is not available, do the following:

- Get into a warm room as soon as possible
- Unless absolutely necessary, do not walk on frostbitten feet or toes – this increases the damage.
- Immerse the affected area in warm – not hot – water. (The temperature should be comfortable to the touch for unaffected parts of the body.)
- Or, warm the affected area using body heat. For example, the heat of an armpit can be used to warm frostbitten fingers.
- Do not rub the frostbitten area with snow or massage it at all. This can cause more damage.
- Do not use a heating pad, heat lamp, or the heat of a stove, fireplace, or radiator for warming. Affected areas are numb and can be easily burned.

These procedures are not substitutes for proper medical care. Hypothermia is a medical emergency and frostbite should be evaluated by a health care provider. It is a good idea to take a first aid and emergency resuscitation (CPR) course to prepare for cold-weather health problems. Knowing what to do is an important part of protecting your health and the health of others.

Also, it is important to remember that cold weather puts an extra strain on the heart. If you have heart disease or high blood pressure, follow your doctor's advice about shoveling snow or performing other hard work in the cold. For a copy of CDC's Extreme Cold Prevention Guide visit <http://emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/guide.asp>

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