



Winter Weather Alert

Promoting Wellness and Recovery

Mike DeWine, Governor

Lori Criss, Director

Justin Trevino, M.D., Medical Director

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Inpatient and community clients are at risk for winter weather injuries. To avoid cold-related complications, ensure that patients:

- Dress in multiple layers of loose, dry clothing.
- Wear a heavy winter or water/wind-resistant coat and boots.
- Adequately cover hands, feet, face, nose and head. A warm hat or hood is critical, as up to 40 percent of the body's heat is lost if the head isn't covered.
- Wear a hat, scarf and mittens/gloves.
- Wear sturdy shoes and boots with a good tread.
- Don't stay outdoors too long in extreme cold (including waiting for a bus).
- Don't walk on frozen ponds or lakes — never assume that ice is "safe."
- Be careful when walking on steps, sidewalks or streets, which may be slippery and increase the risk of falling.
- Be sure that patients about to be discharged and community clients have functioning furnaces at their places of residence.
- Be very careful with any heating elements (space heaters, fireplaces, furnaces, etc.). Ensure they are in good working order and not near combustible materials before use.
- Keep dry. Change wet clothing frequently to prevent a loss of body heat. Wet clothing loses much of its insulating value and transmits heat rapidly away from the body.
- Stretch before you go out. If you go out to shovel snow, do a few stretching exercises to warm up your body. This will reduce your chances of muscle injury.
- Avoid overexertion, such as shoveling heavy snow, pushing a vehicle or walking in deep snow. This strain from the cold and hard labor may cause a heart attack. Sweating could lead to a chill and hypothermia.
- If you must go out during a winter storm, use public transportation, if possible. About 70 percent of winter deaths related to ice and snow occur in automobiles.



More information: <https://www.weather.gov/media/aly/PSAs/ExtremeCold.pdf>.

Watch out for hypothermia:

Hypothermia is a serious, but avoidable consequence of cold exposure, resulting in abnormally low body temperature and medical consequences. In cold temperatures, the body can lose heat faster than it can be produced. Prolonged exposure to the cold will eventually deplete the body's stored energy, resulting in hypothermia. Due to effects on the person's brain function, the victim may become unable to think clearly or move well, and may not recognize that hypothermia is occurring. Hypothermia is most likely to occur in very cold weather, but can occur even at temperatures above 40 degrees Fahrenheit if a person becomes chilled from rain, sweat or submersion in cold water.

Responding to hypothermia:

A person with severe hypothermia may be unconscious and may not seem to have a pulse or appear to be breathing. Handle the person gently and get emergency assistance (call 911) immediately.

Begin warming the person as follows:

- Get the person into a warm room or shelter. Protect the head and neck from the wind if the person cannot be moved.
- Remove any wet clothing.
- Warm the center of the body (chest, neck, head and groin) first using a blanket warmed in a dryer or use an electric blanket, if available and safe to do so.
- Alternatively, 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 offer alcoholic beverages. Never 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.

Even if a person seems lifeless, CPR should be provided and continued while the person is being warmed, until responsive or until medical aid becomes available. In some cases, a person with hypothermia who appears lifeless can be successfully resuscitated.

Avoid frostbite:

Frostbite is an injury to the skin caused by exposure to cold temperatures. Keep all areas of the body covered. Fingers, toes and the face are the most-vulnerable areas. At the first sign of redness or pain in any skin area, get out of the cold and protect any exposed skin.

Sign/symptoms of frostbite include:

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

Responding to frostbite:

If you detect symptoms of frostbite, seek medical care immediately. If there is frostbite but no sign of hypothermia and immediate medical care is not available, proceed as follows:

- Go to a warm room as soon as possible.
- Unless absolutely necessary, do not walk on frostbitten feet or toes, as this increases 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.

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