

Winter Weather Tips from the Chatham County Council on Aging

Winter presents safety hazards in possible frostbite, wind-chapped skin, and hypothermia. Winter weather can often be severe enough to cause amputation or death. The following are some tips to consider:

- Dress warm enough to withstand the lowest forecasted temperature or wind chill temperature. Dress in layers so you can remove if you begin to sweat, because sweating will increase your chance of hypothermia.
- Cover all of your exposed skin in sub-zero weather, including your face, hands, neck, and eyes (wearing goggles can protect the skin around your eyes).
- Wear long underwear rated for cold weather. The best winter weather underwear will be made of polypropylene to keep water away from the skin.
- Mittens vs. Gloves—While gloves may look fashionable, wearing mittens can actually save your life. With your fingers touching each other inside mittens, they generate more body heat than when they're inside gloves. Do not take your mittens or gloves off for extended periods of time, and never take them off in extreme sub-zero temperatures. Your fingers and toes are subject to frostbite the quickest because they are farthest from your core and have the smallest surface area. Think twice before walking outside with your hands in your pockets. Why? Keeping your hands in your pockets increases the risk of you falling or completely losing your balance in case you slip while walking on ice or snow.
- Wear proper socks and boots. Waterproof boots keep your feet dry. Multiple layers of socks and spare socks offer you the opportunity to remove or add layers.
- Drink warm, sweet beverages that do not contain caffeine or alcohol.
- Eat hot, high-calorie foods (like hot pasta dishes) to encourage your body to burn the foods and keep you warm.

Heater Safety

People rarely agree on an ideal temperature. What's too cold to some is blazing hot to others. Be careful if using space heaters—make sure you are taking ALL precautions necessary. Do not use them near paper or other flammables. Never try to heat your home using a gas stove, charcoal grill, or other stove not made for home heating.

Some Frostbite and Hypothermia Symptoms and Treatments

Frostbite symptoms and treatment include:

- Loss of sensations/ loss of feeling in your extremities
- Skin will be flushed before turning grayish yellow or white.
- Skin will feel cold to the touch.
- Treat frostbite by moving the person to a warm area. Remove any clothing that may affect circulation. If there is no danger of the affected area becoming cold again, submerge the affected area (hands, feet, etc.) in warm (105 degrees Fahrenheit) water for 25 to 40 minutes. Then keep the area warm and dry, and seek medical assistance.

Hypothermia symptoms and treatments include:

- Body temperature drops below 95 degrees Fahrenheit.
- May exhibit slow speech, memory lapse, uncontrollable shivering, and stumbling.
- Treat hypothermia by moving to a warm area. Remove cold clothing and dress in warm clothing. Wrap the entire body in blankets to warm the core first. Offer warm, sweet drinks without caffeine or alcohol. Never rub limbs because the coldest blood is in the limbs, and stimulating the limbs will drive the cold blood to the heart, causing heart failure.

**Remember—Ask for help if needed.
A Few More Things to Consider**

Stock Up on Supplies

Winter storms can lead to power outages. Make sure you have easy access to flashlights and a battery-powered radio in case the power goes out. Stockpile warm blankets. Longer power outages can spoil the food in your refrigerator and freezer so keep a supply of non-perishable foods that can be eaten cold on hand. If the power goes out, wear several layers of clothing, including a hat. Move around a lot to raise your body temperature.

Fight Wintertime Depression

Because it can be difficult and dangerous to get around, many seniors have less contact with others during cold months. This can breed feelings of loneliness and isolation. To help avoid these issues, family members and friends should check in on seniors as often as possible. Even a short, daily phone call can make a big difference. Seniors can also arrange a check-in system with neighbors and friends, where each person looks in on one or two others daily.

Eat a Varied Diet

Because people spend more time indoors and may eat a smaller variety of foods, nutritional deficits -- especially Vitamin D deficiency -- can be a problem. Consume foods that are fortified with Vitamin D, such as milk, grains and seafood options like tuna and salmon.

Prevent Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Using a fireplace, gas heater or lanterns can lead to carbon monoxide poisoning. Ensure your safety by checking the batteries on your carbon monoxide detector and buy an updated one if needed.

Again, the most important tip to keep in mind during the colder months is to ask for help if needed. If you need to clear your property of snow and ice, don't hesitate to ask a family member or neighbor. Arrange rides to the grocery store and doctor's appointments. **Don't be afraid to reach out for help.**

Wintertime can certainly pose challenges for seniors, but with a bit of planning and awareness, you will stay healthy and experience the joys of springtime soon enough.

Contact us at the Chatham County Council on Aging if you have questions or if you think we might be able to help.

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