

# Stay Safe in Cold Weather!

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Learn why you need to stay warm when it's cold



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Use the Table of Contents to help you find things quickly. Also, page 14 has a list of groups you can call for more information about staying safe in cold weather.



# What is hypothermia?

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If you are like most people, you feel cold every now and then during the winter. What you may not know is that being really cold can make you very sick.

Older adults can lose body heat fast—faster than when they were young. A big chill can turn into a dangerous problem before an older person even knows what’s happening. Doctors call this serious problem hypothermia (hi-po-**ther**-mee-uh).

Hypothermia is what happens when your body temperature gets very low. For an older person, a body temperature of 95° F or lower can cause many health problems, such as a heart attack, kidney problems, liver damage, or worse.

Being outside in the cold, or even being in a very cold house, can lead to hypothermia. You can take steps to lower your chance of getting hypothermia.

Read this booklet for tips on how to stay safe when it’s cold outside. Share it with your family and friends.

## **This booklet will tell you:**

- what it means to have hypothermia
- how to stay warm and prevent hypothermia
- warning signs of hypothermia

## Sid's story



Vermont winters can be very cold. Last December, I wanted to save some money so I turned my heat down to 62°F. I didn't know that would put my health in danger.

Luckily, my son Jay came by to check on me. He saw that I was only wearing a light shirt and that my house was cold. Jay said I was speaking slowly, shivering, and having trouble walking. He wrapped me in a blanket and called 9-1-1.

Turns out I had hypothermia. My son's quick thinking saved my life. Now on cold days, I keep my heat at least at 68°F and wear a sweater in the house.

# Keep warm inside

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Living in a cold house, apartment, or other building can cause hypothermia. People who are sick may have special problems keeping warm. Do not let it get too cold inside and dress warmly.

## Tips for keeping warm inside:

- ❑ Set your heat to at least 68–70° F. To save on heating bills, close off rooms you are not using. Place a rolled towel in front of all doors to keep out drafts.
- ❑ Make sure your house isn't losing heat through windows. Keep your blinds and curtains closed.
- ❑ To keep warm at home, wear long underwear under your clothes. Use a blanket to keep your legs and shoulders warm. Wear socks and slippers.
- ❑ Make sure you eat enough food to keep up your weight. You need some body fat to stay warm.
- ❑ When the weather is cold, avoid alcohol. It can make you lose body heat.
- ❑ When you go to sleep, wear long underwear under your pajamas, and use extra covers. Wear a cap or hat.
- ❑ Ask family or friends to check on you during cold weather. If a power outage leaves you without heat, try to stay with a relative or friend.

# Kay's story



We're a farm family, and the chores don't stop when the weather gets cold. My sister Sarah and I are in our 70s. When it is cold, we wear our gloves, hats, boots, scarves, and layers of loose clothing under our jackets.

We don't stay outside for long stretches. When the wind is really whipping, we stay inside and call on my grandkids to help with the outdoor work. It doesn't have to be freezing outside for an older person to get hypothermia.

# Bundle up on windy, cool days

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A heavy wind can quickly lower your body temperature. Check the weather forecast for windy and cold days. On those days, try to stay inside or in a warm place. If you have to go out, wear warm clothes, and don't stay out for a long time.

## Tips for bundling up:

- Dress for the weather if you have to go out on chilly, cold, or damp days.
- Wear loose layers of clothing. The air between the layers helps to keep you warm.
- Put on a hat and scarf. You lose a lot of body heat when your head and neck are uncovered.
- Wear a waterproof coat or jacket if it's snowy.
- Change your clothes right away if they get damp or wet.

## Rodney's story



I have diabetes and my wife Rita has some heart problems. Our doctor told us the medicines we take could make it easy for us to get really cold before we even know what's happening. That's not good.

Our doctor said it would help if we stay active, even in cold weather. So, in the fall and winter we walk inside the shopping mall each morning to stay active. It's great! Rita and I can keep moving and still stay inside when it's cold.

# Talk with your doctor about how to stay safe in cold weather

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Some illnesses may make it harder for your body to stay warm. Taking some medicines and not being active also can affect body heat. Your doctor can help you find ways to prevent hypothermia.

## Tips for talking with your doctor about hypothermia:

- Ask your doctor about signs of hypothermia.
- Talk to your doctor about any health problems and medicines that can make hypothermia a special problem for you.
- Ask about safe ways to stay active even when it's cold outside.

# Warning signs of hypothermia

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Sometimes it is hard to tell if a person has hypothermia. Look for clues. Is the house very cold? Is the person not dressed for cold weather? Is the person speaking slower than normal and having trouble keeping his or her balance?

Watch for the signs of hypothermia in yourself, too. You might become confused if your body temperature gets very low. Talk to your family and friends about the warning signs so they can look out for you.



## Early signs of hypothermia:

- cold feet and hands
- puffy or swollen face
- pale skin
- shivering (in some cases the person with hypothermia does not shiver)
- slower than normal speech or slurring words
- acting sleepy
- being angry or confused

## Later signs of hypothermia:

- moving slowly, trouble walking, or being clumsy
- stiff and jerky arm or leg movements
- slow heartbeat
- slow, shallow breathing
- blacking out or losing consciousness

**Call 9-1-1 right away if you think someone has warning signs of hypothermia.**

# Tips for what to do after you call 9-1-1

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- ❑ Try to move the person to a warmer place.
- ❑ Wrap the person in a warm blanket, towels, or coats—whatever is handy. Even your own body warmth will help. Lie close, but be gentle.
- ❑ Give the person something warm to drink, but avoid drinks with alcohol or caffeine, such as regular coffee.
- ❑ Do not rub the person's legs or arms.
- ❑ Do not try to warm the person in a bath.
- ❑ Do not use a heating pad.



# Your questions answered

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**Q.** What health problems can make it hard for my body to stay warm?

**A.** Many kinds of health problems that affect older people can put them at risk for hypothermia. Some of them are listed below.

- Thyroid problems can make it hard to maintain a normal body temperature.
- Diabetes can keep blood from flowing normally to provide warmth.
- Parkinson’s disease and arthritis can make it hard to put on more clothes, use a blanket, or get out of the cold.
- Memory loss can cause a person to go outside without the right clothing.

Talk to your doctor about your health problems and hypothermia. Your doctor can help you find ways to prevent hypothermia.

**Q.** Can medicines lower my body’s temperature?

**A.** Yes. Some medicines used by older people can make it easy to get hypothermia. These include medicines you get from your doctor and those you buy over-the-counter, such as some cold medicines. Ask your doctor if the medicines you take may affect body heat. Always talk to your doctor before you stop taking any medicine.

**Q. What can I do to stay warm at home?**

**A.** Try closing off any rooms you are not using. Close the vents and shut the doors in these rooms, and keep the basement door closed. Place a rolled towel in front of all doors to keep out drafts.

Also, make sure your house isn't losing heat through windows. Keep your blinds and curtains closed. If you have gaps around windows, use weather stripping or caulk to keep the cold air out.

You may be tempted to warm your room with a space heater. But, some space heaters are fire hazards, and others can cause carbon monoxide poisoning. The Consumer Product Safety Commission has information on the use of space heaters.

**Q. Can I get any help with my heating bills?**

**A.** You may be able to get help paying your heating bill. You can call the National Energy Assistance Referral service for free at 1-866-674-6327 to get information about the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. Or, email them at [energyassistance@ncat.org](mailto:energyassistance@ncat.org).

If your home doesn't have enough insulation, contact your state or local energy agency or the local power or gas company. They may be able to give you information about weatherizing your home. This can help keep heating bills down.

These agencies and companies may also have special programs for people who have a limited income and qualify for help paying the heating bill. Your local Area Agency on Aging, senior center, or social service agency may have information on these programs.

# Summary—What you can do about hypothermia

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- ❑ Set your heat to at least 68–70°F.
- ❑ Dress warmly on cold days even if you are staying in the house.
- ❑ Wear loose layers when you go outside on chilly days. Wear a hat, scarf, and gloves.
- ❑ Don't stay out in the cold and wind for a long time.
- ❑ If your clothes are damp or wet, change into dry clothes right away.
- ❑ Talk to your doctor about health problems that may make it harder for you to keep warm.
- ❑ Find safe ways to stay active even when it's cold outside.
- ❑ Ask a neighbor or friend to check on you if you live alone.
- ❑ If you think someone has hypothermia, call 9-1-1 right away. Cover him or her with a blanket. Don't rub his or her legs or arms.

# For more information

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## **Eldercare Locator**

1-800-677-1116 (toll-free)  
www.eldercare.gov

## **National Association of Area Agencies on Aging**

1-202-872-0888  
info@n4a.org  
www.n4a.org

## **Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program**

### **National Energy Assistance Referral**

1-866-674-6327 (toll-free)  
1-866-367-6228 (TTY/toll-free)  
energyassistance@ncat.org  
<https://liheapch.acf.hhs.gov/referral.htm>

## **Consumer Product Safety Commission**

1-800-638-2772 (toll-free)  
1-301-595-7054 (TTY)  
www.cpsc.gov

## To learn more about health and aging:

### National Institute on Aging Information Center

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)

1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

[niaic@nia.nih.gov](mailto:niaic@nia.nih.gov)

[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)

Visit [www.nia.nih.gov/health](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health) to find more health and aging information from NIA and subscribe to email alerts. Visit <https://order.nia.nih.gov> to order free print publications.

Share this booklet with friends and family so they can learn the signs of hypothermia and how to prevent it.



National Institute  
on Aging

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