

PROTECTED TOMORROWS

COLD WEATHER TIPS FOR SENIORS

BY CICILY CORBETT

Cold weather can pose serious health hazards to older adults. Many seniors dread the onset of winter. Falls and other accidents, hypothermia, and depression are more common as the temperature drops. The key to safety is prevention. Follow these simple tips to ensure a safe season.

More than 1.6 million older Americans go to the emergency room each year for fall-related injuries, according to the National Institutes of Health. Only half of those hospitalized for a hip fracture return home or continue to live independently. But falls don't have to happen, even when snow and ice make for slippery travel. To lessen the chance of falling in cold weather:

- Stretch before going outside. Stretching improves circulation and limbers muscles.
- Wear sensible footwear. Shoes should have low heels, good support, and non-skid soles.
- Stick to cleared sidewalks and roads. Shovel snow; sprinkle sand or salt on icy areas—or ask someone to do it for you.
- Use assistive devices when necessary. Hold handrails on stairs. Use a cane or walker if necessary to help maintain balance.
- Avoid going outside when conditions are poor. Exercise indoors. Stock up on necessities in good weather, or ask someone to deliver them to you.

As people age, their sense of touch declines. Arthritis, diabetes, poor circulation, paralysis caused by stroke, and many other conditions can cause lack of feeling, especially in the extremities. A diminished response to cold can put seniors at risk for hypothermia (abnormally low body temperature). To prevent hypothermia:

- Keep thermostat set at 68 degrees or above. If paying your energy bill is a burden, you may be eligible for fuel assistance. Contact the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, a public service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, or the Eldercare Locator, a public service of the U.S. Administration on Aging.
- To reduce heating costs, make your home more energy-efficient. Contact the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Weatherization Assistance Program to see if you're eligible for home improvements paid for by the program.
- Dress in loose-fitting, layered, lightweight clothes for warmth.
- Keep head covered when outdoors—a great deal of body heat is lost through the head.
- Wear mittens or gloves outdoors.

- Eat well. Food provides the body with energy. Remember, calories are a measure of heat! Seniors who have difficulty preparing their own food can have a member organization of the Meals on Wheels Association of America deliver nutritious meals. Some programs even provide services (through the WALOP initiative—“We All Love Our Pets”) to their clients’ pets!
- Be alert for symptoms of hypothermia and frostbite. Hypothermia symptoms include slurred speech, sluggishness, confusion, dizziness, shallow breathing, unusual behavior, and slow, irregular heartbeat. Frostbite symptoms include gray, white or yellow skin discoloration, numbness, and waxy feeling skin. If either of these conditions is suspected, get immediate emergency help. Warm the body, but avoid rubbing tender skin.

Reduced sensitivity to temperature can also cause burns from too-hot water. To prevent burns:

- Set the temperature on the hot water heater to 120 degrees or lower.
- When using faucets, turn on cold water first, then add hot. When turning off the water, shut off hot water first, then cold.

As we age, our skin becomes thinner and drier, and thus more susceptible to tears. Certain medications can thin already fragile nasal tissue, creating risk of nosebleeds. To lessen the possibility of dangers associated with dryness:

- Keep room air moist. Add a humidifier to your heating unit, if possible, or purchase a separate humidifier or vaporizer. Another option is to place a pan filled with water near a heat source, such as a radiator. Remember to change the water daily.
- Keep your body moist! Drink plenty of water and other fluids. Eat foods with high water content like soups and vegetables.
- Moisturize your skin with creams or lotions. Use nasal lubricants or petroleum jelly to protect the lining of the nose.

Perhaps the most devastating threat to seniors in wintertime is depression. Inclement weather can restrict activities and the opportunities to mingle with others. The isolation and loneliness that afflict many seniors become even worse when the weather is harsh. Shorter days mean less sunlight, which can also contribute to depression. To prevent depression:

- Socialize. Make an effort to visit with family and friends. Contact a local Council on Aging for help in locating transportation services, senior centers, and social activities.
- When the weather is too harsh for travel, pick up the phone and call a friend or relative for a chat.

Winter storms can mean power outages and resultant loss of heat, water, and telephone service. Inclement weather can mean difficulty going out for necessary supplies. Be prepared for emergencies:

- Stock up on food and fresh water. Some Meals on Wheels programs provide frozen emergency food packs that can be heated on days there is no delivery.

- Keep batteries, candles, flashlights, Sterno fuel, extra blankets, and a battery-operated radio on hand.

Don't wait for emergencies to develop a system of communication. Everyone living alone should develop a "buddy system."

"If you have an elderly neighbor, check on them," recommends Karen Martin, Community Services Director of the Greater Springfield Senior Services, Incorporated. "Their heat could have gone out, or their electricity. A quick call can be so important."

Resources:

Information about the risks of falling and what you can do to prevent falls can be found on the NIHSeniorHealth website:

www.NIHSeniorHealth.gov

Fuel assistance programs are administered at the state level, and eligibility varies by state. To find a program in your area, as well as many other services for seniors, use the Eldercare Locator:

1-800-677- 1116

<http://www.eldercare.gov>

The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) Clearinghouse, a public service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, collects, develops, organizes and disseminates information on low-income energy issues:

866-674-6327

<http://www.energynear.org>

U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Weatherization Assistance Program helps low-income families and individuals make their homes more energy-efficient, thus reducing energy bills:

877-337-3463

<http://www.eere.energy.gov/weatherization>

Meals on Wheels Association of America (MOWAA) is the oldest and largest organization in the United States representing those who provide meal services to people in need:

703-548-5558

<http://www.mowaa.org>

Sources:

All of the above, plus an interview with Karen Martin, Community Services Director, Greater Springfield [MA] Senior Services, 66 Industry Ave., Springfield, MA 01104
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<http://www.gssi.org/>