

WINTER COLD CAN BE HAZARDOUS TO THE ELDERLY

Each winter, elderly individuals suffer illness, serious accidents, and even death related to cold temperatures.

Exposure to cold temperatures can lead to hypothermia, a drop in body temperature that can be life threatening, particularly for the elderly. Symptoms include slow speech, confusion, fatigue, feelings of deep cold and numbness, decreased heart rate, pale and cold skin, and uncontrollable shivering.

Seniors on low fixed incomes are especially vulnerable because they may hesitate to adequately warm their homes due to worries about high utility bills.

The Visiting Nurse Association has suggestions to help ensure a warm and safe winter for the elderly:

- Try to keep the temperature in the main room of the house to at least 70 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Stay indoors as much as possible during cold weather. If it's necessary to go outside, wear gloves and a hat. An uncovered head loses 40 to 50 percent of a person's body heat.
- Dress warmly, indoors and out, using several layers of thin clothing. Layered clothing traps warm air and helps keep the body warm. Keep clothing dry; if a layer becomes wet, remove it.
- Hot meals and drinks provide warmth and energy. Eat small amounts of food frequently during the day because the body burns more calories as it works to stay warm.
- Drink plenty of water. The body loses moisture when the air is cold and dry. If dehydrated, the body gets cold easier.
- Stay as active as possible to maintain circulation. Any activity gets circulation going and helps the body become warmer.
- Draft-proof doors and windows to help keep heat inside the house.

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- Use only portable heaters that are approved for indoor use. Using outdoor portable heaters inside a house can lead to fire or dangerous levels of carbon monoxide.
- Keep combustible materials, including furniture and drapes at least three feet away from any heat source. Never dry clothes on a space heater.
- Make sure there is a working smoke detector in every room and that the batteries are checked regularly.

The Visiting Nurse Association also suggests that relatives and friends routinely check on people 65 years of age and older during periods of freezing temperatures to see if the heat inside their homes is adequate and safety precautions are being followed. If hypothermia is suspected, 9-1-1 should be called.

"Many of our elderly find it difficult to ask for help, valuing self-reliance and independence, even if it means ignoring a need," advises Linda Mason, R.N., vice president of long-term care with the Visiting Nurse Association. "If you think an elderly family member or neighbor needs assistance, make an effort to help," she adds.



Cold winter temperatures can be hazardous to the elderly, but there are ways to help stay warm and safe in the home advises the Visiting Nurse Association.

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