

## **COLD WEATHER HEALTH EMERGENCIES**

- When winter temperatures drop significantly below normal, staying warm and safe can become a challenge.
- Lower than normal temperatures and higher wind speeds – such as we’re experiencing this week – can cause heat to leave your body more quickly than normal and result in serious health problems.

### **Monitor Body Temperature**

Exposure to cold temperatures, whether indoors or outdoors, can cause serious or life-threatening health problems.

- Infants and older Pennsylvanians are more at risk to serious cold-related health problems.
  - Infants:
    - Infants less than 1 year old should never sleep in a cold room because (1) infants lose body heat more easily than adults; and (2) unlike adults, infants can’t make enough body heat by shivering.
    - Provide warm clothing for infants and try to maintain a warm indoor temperature. If the temperature cannot be maintained, make temporary arrangements to stay elsewhere.
  - Older Pennsylvanians:
    - Older adults often make less body heat because of a slower metabolism and less physical activity. If you are over 65 years of age, check the temperature in your home often during severely cold weather.
    - Also, check on older friends and neighbors frequently to ensure that their homes are adequately heated.
- The most common cold-related problems are hypothermia and frostbite.

### **Hypothermia (unusually low body temperature):**

- When you have hypothermia, it affects your brain and prevents you from thinking clearly or moving well. That is why hypothermia is so dangerous. You may not even know it is happening and won’t be able to do anything about it.
- Hypothermia usually occurs at very cold temperatures, but can also happen even at cool temperatures above 40 degrees Fahrenheit if a person becomes chilled from rain, sweat or from being in cold water.
  - Victims of hypothermia are most often:
    - Older people with too little food, clothing or heating;
    - Babies sleeping in cold bedrooms;
    - Children left unattended;
    - Adults under the influence of alcohol;
    - Individuals with emotional disabilities; and
    - People who remain outdoors for long periods.

### **Hypothermia Warning Signs:**

- Adults:
  - shivering/exhaustion
  - confusion/fumbling hands

- memory loss/slurred speech
- drowsiness ○ Infants:
- bright red, cold skin
- very low energy
  - If you think someone may have hypothermia, take their temperature. If it is below 95 degrees, get immediate medical attention.

**Frostbite (injury to the body caused by exposure to very cold temperatures):**

- Frostbite causes a loss of feeling and color in affected areas. It most often affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers or toes. Frostbite can permanently damage the body, and severe cases can lead to amputation.

**Frostbite Warning Signs:**

- At the first signs of redness or pain in any skin area, get out of the cold or protect any exposed skin – you may be getting frostbite. If you have any of the following signs, it might be frostbite:
  - a white or grayish-yellow skin area
  - skin that feels unusually firm or waxy
  - numbness
- If you see someone with frostbite symptoms, make sure that person gets medical care.

**Outdoor Safety:**

- Try to stay indoors as much as possible.
- If you have to go outside:
  - Dress warmly and stay dry.
  - Keep your trips brief.
  - Do not ignore shivering. It's an important first sign your body is losing heat. Shivering is a sign it's time to return indoors.
  - Avoid exertion. Cold weather puts an extra strain on the heart and can be more serious for people with heart disease or high blood pressure.
  - If you have to do outdoor chores, dress warmly and work slowly. Remember – your body is already working hard just to stay warm so don't overdo it.

**Indoor Safety / Carbon Monoxide Poisoning:**

**Carbon Monoxide Poisoning:** Carbon monoxide (CO) is an odorless, colorless gas that can cause sudden illness and death if inhaled.

- The use of other sources of fuel or electricity for heating, cooling or cooking can cause CO to build up in a home or garage and poison the people and animals inside. ○ CO is found in combustion fumes, such as those made by small gasoline engines, stoves, generators, lanterns and gas ranges, or by burning charcoal and wood.
- How to Recognize CO Poisoning
  - Exposure to CO can cause loss of consciousness and death.
  - The most common symptoms of CO poisoning are:
    - Headache;
    - Dizziness;
    - Weakness;
    - Nausea / Vomiting;

- Chest pain;
- Confusion.
- People who are sleeping or who have been drinking alcohol can die from CO poisoning before ever having symptoms.

### **Important CO Poisoning Prevention Tips**

- Never use a gas range or oven to heat a home.
- Never run a generator outside an open window, door or vent where exhaust can vent into an enclosed area.
- Never run a generator inside a basement, garage or other enclosed structure, even if the doors or windows are open, unless the equipment is professionally installed and vented.
- Never use a charcoal grill, hibachi, lantern or portable camping stove inside a home, garage or camper.
- If conditions are too cold, seek shelter with friends or at a community shelter. ○ If CO poisoning is suspected, call a healthcare professional right away. ○ Install a battery-operated CO detector. If the CO detector alarm sounds, leave your home immediately and call 9-1-1.

### **Eat and Drink Wisely**

- Eating well-balanced meals will help you stay warmer.
- Do not drink alcoholic or caffeinated beverages – they cause your body to lose heat more rapidly. Instead, drink warm, sweet beverages (like hot cocoa) or broth to help maintain your body temperature. If you have dietary restrictions, ask a healthcare provider about what warm drinks are best for you.