



Winter Weather Safety for Seniors

Prepare for Colder Days Ahead



Winter Storms and Extreme Cold[†]

1) *Before Storms & Extreme Cold*

- Before winter approaches, add the following supplies to your emergency kit:
 - Rock salt or more environmentally safe products to melt ice on walkways.
 - Sand to improve traction.
 - Snow shovels and other snow removal equipment.
 - Sufficient heating fuel. You may become isolated in your home and regular fuel sources may be cut off.
 - Adequate clothing and blankets to keep you warm.
- Make a family communications plan. Your family may not be together when disaster strikes, so it is important to know what to do in case of an emergency.
- Listen to a NOAA Weather Radio or other local news channels for critical information from the National Weather Service (NWS).
- Minimize travel. If travel is necessary, keep a disaster supply kit in your vehicle.
- Bring pets/companion animals inside during winter weather.

2) *Winterize Your Home*

- Extend the life of your fuel supply; insulate your home by installing storm windows or covering windows with plastic from the inside to keep cold air out.
- Clear rain gutters, repair roof leaks and cut away tree branches that could fall on a house or other structure during a storm.
- Maintain heating equipment and chimneys by having them cleaned and inspected every year.
- All fuel-burning equipment should be vented to the outside and kept clear.
- Learn how to shut off water valves (in case a pipe bursts).
- Hire a contractor to check the structural integrity of the roof to sustain unusually heavy weight from the accumulation of snow - or water, if drains on flat roofs do not work.

Winter Safety Awareness

While winter weather dangers vary across the country, nearly all Americans are likely to face some type of severe winter weather. Winter storms can range from a moderate snow over a few hours to a blizzard with blinding, wind-driven snow that lasts for several days. Many winter storms are accompanied by dangerously low temperatures and sometimes by strong winds, ice, sleet and freezing rain. Seniors are most likely to require assistance, and sometimes monitoring, in the colder months.

Hypothermia

Seniors often feel the cold more because of poor circulation and/or pre-existing respiratory conditions, but there is one time when feeling the cold can be deadly— hypothermia, a serious lowering of the core body temperature.²

Fifty percent of hypothermia deaths occur in people over the age of 75, and even mildly cold temperatures can be dangerous.

Warning signs of hypothermia include:

- Slowed breathing or heart rate
- Cold skin that is pale or ashy
- Feeling tired and weak
- Problems walking
- Shivering

Hypothermia occurs when the body temperature falls below 95° F and requires immediate medical attention.

Anyone exhibiting symptoms should be wrapped in a warm blanket covering the body and head.

Administering warm fluids may help, but avoid caffeine and alcohol, which can worsen the situation.

Frostbite

Frostbite is damage to the skin and underlying tissues caused by extreme cold. Frostbite is the most common freezing injury.²

Frostbite occurs when the skin and body tissues are exposed to cold temperature for a long period of time.

You are more likely to develop frostbite if you:

- Take medicines called beta-blockers
- Have diabetes
- Have poor blood supply to the legs
- Smoke
- Have Raynaud's phenomenon

Symptoms of frostbite include:

- Pins and needles feeling, followed by numbness
- Hard, pale, and cold skin that has been exposed to the cold for too long
- Aching, throbbing or lack of feeling in the affected area
- Red and extremely painful skin and muscle as the area thaws

Very severe frostbite may cause:

- Blisters
- Gangrene (blackened, dead tissue)
- Damage to tendons, muscles, nerves, and bone

Frostbite may affect any part of the body. The hands, feet, nose, and ears are the places most susceptible.

Take the following steps if you think someone might have frostbite:

- Shelter the person from the cold and move him or her to a warmer place. Remove any tight jewelry and wet clothes. Look for signs of hypothermia (lowered body temperature) and treat that condition first.
- If medical help is not nearby, you may give the person rewarming first aid. Soak the affected areas in warm (never hot) water -- for 20 to 30 minutes. For ears, nose, and cheeks, apply warm cloths soaked in 104° to 108° F water. Keep circulating the water to aid the warming process. Severe burning pain, swelling, and color changes may occur during warming. Warming is complete when the skin is soft and feeling returns.



Know the Terms[†]

Familiarize yourself with these terms to help identify a winter storm hazard:

Freezing Rain - Rain that freezes when it hits the ground, creating a coating of ice on roads, walkways, trees and power lines.

Sleet - Rain that turns to ice pellets before reaching the ground. Sleet also causes moisture on roads to freeze and become slippery.

Winter Weather Advisory - Winter weather conditions are expected to cause significant inconveniences and may be hazardous. When caution is used, these situations should not be life threatening.

Winter Storm Watch - A winter storm is possible in your area. Tune in to NOAA Weather Radio, commercial radio, or television for more information.

Winter Storm Warning - A winter storm is occurring or will soon occur in your area.

Blizzard Warning - Sustained winds or frequent gusts to 35 miles per hour or greater and considerable amounts of falling or blowing snow (reducing visibility to less than a quarter mile) are expected to prevail for a period of three hours or longer.

Frost/Freeze Warning - Below freezing temperatures are expected.

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†Information provided by the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) ² Information provided by the U.S. National Library of Medicine