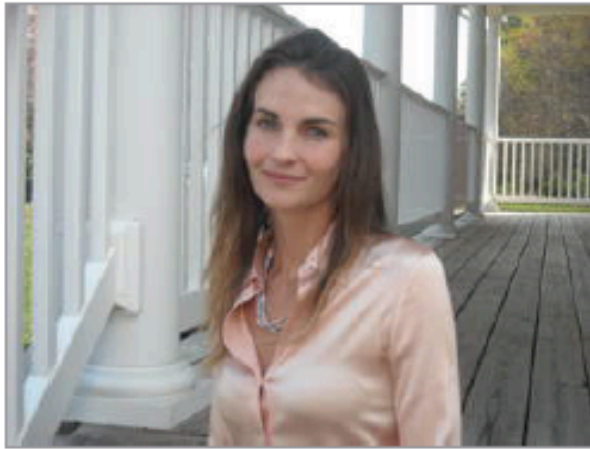


Cold weather tips to safeguard seniors

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Seniors are particularly susceptible to cold weather's dangers. Falls and hypothermia top the list of hazards, followed by influenza and other easily spread, potentially deadly viral infections. Blood pressure can also rise with the drop in temperature, posing additional health threats.

Annalise Forman, director of Visiting Angels of Sussex, Delaware, a homecare agency that provides caregivers to help seniors and disabled adults remain independent, offers suggestions to reduce risks this winter.

Falls and their consequences are a leading cause of death in people 65 years and older, and are of course more likely when ice and snow make walking more difficult. Recovery may involve a lengthy stay in a facility, weeks of

physical therapy and the loss of independence at home.

"Wear proper footwear," says Forman. "Rubber soles with treads outdoors, and shoes with a rough-textured sole indoors. All home entrances should have carpets or rugs, or somewhere to dry shoes before stepping onto hardwood or tile."

Forman also suggests that seniors not walk alone in rain, ice or snow, and to make sure sidewalks and driveways are clear and sanded or salted.

Hypothermia occurs when exposure to cold causes a person's body to lose heat faster than it can be replaced. As people age, fat and muscle loss hinders the body's ability to generate heat. Seniors may also take medications that can interfere with the body's ability to regulate temperature.

"Keep room temperatures set at 70 degrees or warmer," says Forman. "Use plenty of blankets, and have somebody inspect the heating unit to make sure it is in good working condition before the coldest weather arrives."

Forman urges that seniors wear hats, gloves or mittens, and scarves with a warm coat if they must go outside, and socks or slippers should always be worn indoors.

"Hypothermia is not only a result of exposure to extreme cold, but can be brought on by prolonged exposure to low temperatures," Forman says. "Those who live alone are especially vulnerable to hypothermia because symptoms often begin gradually, and the confused thinking associated with hypothermia prevents self-awareness."

Influenza and other viruses are generally spread through coughs or sneezes. In warm weather, the virus's cell wall is often not strong enough to withstand the elements, but as temperatures drop, the protective outer covering of the cell hardens and shields the virus as it passes from person to person.

Once inside the respiratory tract, the virus thaws and infects healthy cells within the body. This change from one state (liquid) to another (gel), occurs at about 60 degrees, making flu outbreaks common in the fall and winter.

Forman says, "Thorough hand washing and clean surfaces prevent the spread of viruses. Cover your

nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, and dispose of used tissues immediately. An improper diet can lead to a lowered immune system. Plenty of fluids are always essential, and good nutrition that includes fruits, vegetables and hot meals can help the body fight back.”

Blood pressure rises during colder temperatures, and high blood pressure increases the risk of strokes and aneurysms. Certain medications affect blood vessels’ ability to respond to temperature changes, and the constriction and contraction of blood vessels directly affects blood pressure.

“Be aware of which medications affect blood pressure and monitor it frequently, especially when you feel dizzy or faint,” says Forman.

In the case of falls, hypothermia, influenza or abnormal change in blood pressure, Forman advises families and caregivers to always consult a physician.

“People that are physically inactive, have poor diets or take certain medications should be especially cautious this winter,” says Forman. “As a community, we need to look in on those who live alone and be sure they’re not exposed to prolonged cold due to insufficient heat.”

Visiting Angels provides caregivers from a few hours a week to 24/7 live-in care at affordable hourly rates. Friendly, compassionate “angels” offer help with personal hygiene, meal preparation, light housekeeping, shopping, errands and appointments, and joyful companionship this winter and year round.

For more information, call 302-329-9475 to schedule a free in-home assessment.