

Stay Safe in Cold Weather!

Learn why you need to stay warm when it's cold.



National Institute on Aging

What's inside

Read this booklet for practical tips on how to stay safe when it's cold outside. Share the booklet with your family and friends.

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Stay safe in cold weather

Learn why you need to stay warm

If you are like most older people, you feel cold every now and then during the winter. What you may not know is that just being really cold can make you very sick.

Older adults can lose body heat fast—faster than when they were young. A big chill can turn into a dangerous problem before an older person even knows what's happening. Doctors call this serious problem **hypothermia** (hi-po-ther-mee-uh).

Being outside in the cold, or even being in a very cold house, can lead to hypothermia. Hypothermia is what happens when your body temperature gets very low.

What is a low body temperature? For an older person, a body temperature colder than 95 degrees can cause many health problems such as heart attack, kidney problems, liver damage, or worse.

You can take steps to lower your chance of getting hypothermia. Read this booklet to learn how to protect yourself.



What do some older adults say about hypothermia?

Bob's story— Keep warm inside.

“Vermont winters can be very cold. Last December I wanted to save some money so I turned my heat down to 62 degrees. I didn't know that would put my health in danger.

Luckily, my son Tyler came by to check on me. He saw I was only wearing a light shirt and that my house was cold. Ty says I was speaking slowly, shivering, and having trouble walking. He wrapped me in a blanket and called 911.

Turns out I had hypothermia. My son's quick thinking saved my life. Now on cold days, I keep my heat at least at 68 degrees and wear a sweater in the house.”

Bob's tips:

1. Set your heat at 68 degrees or higher. To save on heating bills, close off rooms you are not using.
2. To keep warm at home, wear long johns under your clothes. Throw a blanket over your legs. Wear socks and slippers.
3. When you go to sleep, wear long johns under your pajamas, and use extra covers. Wear a cap or hat.
4. Ask family or friends to check on you during cold weather.





Kay's story— Bundle up on windy, cool days.

“We’re a farm family and the chores don’t stop when the weather gets cold. My sister Sarah and I are in our 70’s. When it is cold we wear our gloves, hats, boots, scarves, and layers of loose clothing under our jackets.

We don’t stay outside for long stretches. When the wind is really whipping, we stay inside and call on my grandsons to help with the outdoor work. It doesn’t have to be freezing out for an older person to get hypothermia.”

Kay's tips:

1. Dress for the weather if you have to go out on chilly, cold, or damp days.
2. Wear loose layers of clothing. The air between the layers helps to keep you warm.
3. Put on a hat and scarf. You lose a lot of body heat when your head and neck are uncovered.
4. Stay inside when it is very windy outside. A high wind can quickly lower your body temperature.

Rodney's story— Stay active!

"I have diabetes and my wife Rita has had some heart problems. Dr. Mills said the medicines we take could make it easy for us to get really cold before we even know what is happening. That's not good. The doctor said it would help if we stay active, even in cold weather. So, in the fall and winter we walk inside at the shopping center each morning to stay active. It's great! Rita and I can keep moving and still stay inside when it's cold."

Rodney's tips:

1. Talk to your doctor about any health problems and medicines that can make hypothermia a special problem for you.
2. Find safe ways to stay active even when it's cold outside.

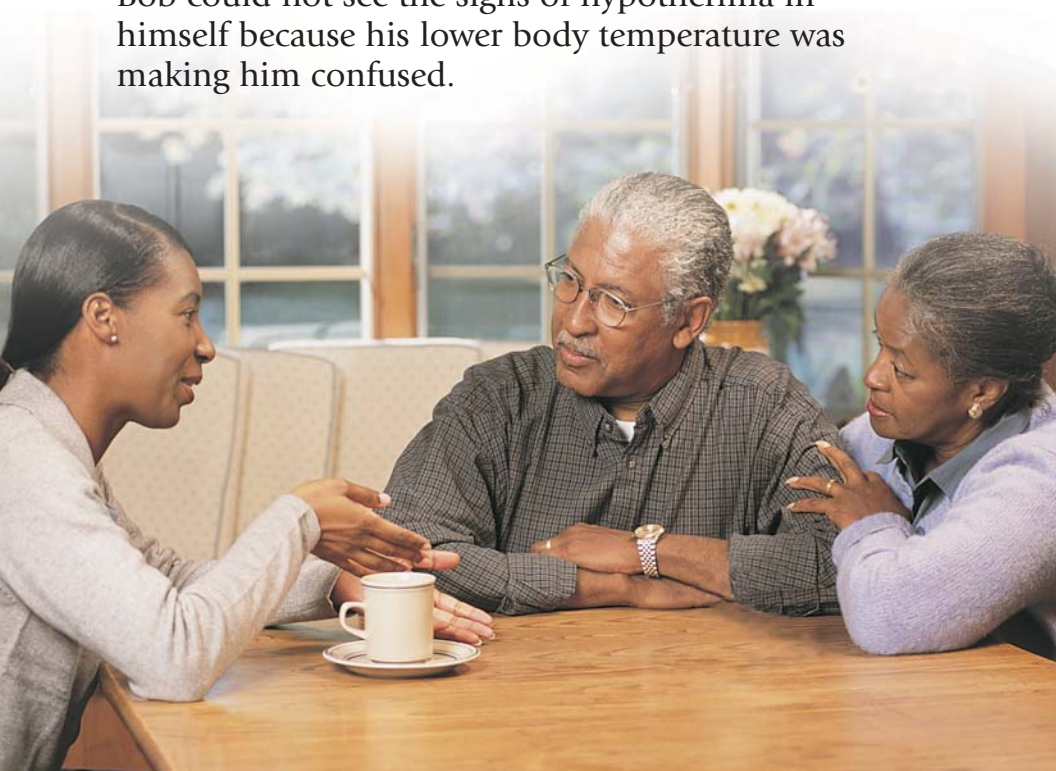
These tips from Bob, Kay, and Rodney can help you stay warm in cold weather.



What are the first signs of hypothermia?

Sometimes it is hard to tell if a person has hypothermia. People around you may see clues, just like Bob's son did. He paid attention. He saw the house was very cold and his dad was wearing a light shirt. He noticed his dad speaking slower than normal and having trouble keeping his balance.

Bob could not see the signs of hypothermia in himself because his lower body temperature was making him confused.



Hypothermia happens by mistake. Talk to your family and friends about the warning signs so they can look out for you, too.

Warning signs to look for:

Early signs of hypothermia

- Cold feet and hands
- Puffy or swollen face
- Pale skin
- Shivering (in some cases the person with hypothermia does not shiver)
- Slower than normal speech or slurring words
- Acting sleepy
- Being angry or confused

Later signs of hypothermia

- Moving slowly, trouble walking, or being clumsy
- Stiff and jerky arm or leg movements
- Slow heartbeat that is not regular
- Slow, shallow breathing
- Blacking out or losing consciousness

Call 911 right away if you think someone has warning signs of hypothermia.

What can family and friends do until medical help arrives?

- Call 911.
- Wrap the person in a warm blanket.
- Do not rub the person's legs or arms.
- Do not try to warm the person in a bath, and do not use a heating pad.



Answers to your questions

What health problems can make it easy to get hypothermia?

Diabetes, thyroid problems, Parkinson's disease, or arthritis are common problems for older people. These health concerns can make it harder for your body to stay warm.

Talk to your doctor about your health problems and hypothermia. Your doctor can tell you how to stay warm enough even when it's cold outside.

Can medicines lower my temperature?

Yes. Some medicines used by older people can make it easy to get hypothermia. This includes medicines you get from your doctor as well as those you buy over-the-counter. Talk to your doctor before you stop taking any medicine.



What can I do to stay warm at home?

- Close off any room you are not using. Close the vents and shut the doors in these rooms. Place a rolled towel in front of all doors to keep out drafts.
- Make sure your house isn't losing heat through windows. Keep your blinds and curtains closed. If you have gaps around the windows, try using weather stripping or caulk to keep the cold air out.
- Wear warm clothes during the day and use extra blankets at night.

Can I get any help with my heating bills?

You may be able to get help paying your heating bill. You can call the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program hotline toll-free at 1-866-674-6327. Or visit them online at www.ncat.org.



Summary—What you can do about hypothermia

- Dress warmly on cold days even if you are staying in the house. Set your heat at 68 degrees or higher.
- Wear loose layers when you go outside on chilly days. Wear a hat, scarf, and gloves. Don't stay out in the cold and wind for a long time.
- Talk to your doctor about health problems that may make it harder for you to keep warm.
- Find safe ways to stay active even when it's cold outside.
- Ask a neighbor or friend to check on you if you live alone.
- If you think someone has hypothermia, call 911 right away. Cover him or her with a blanket. Don't rub his or her legs or arms.

What else can you do?

Share this booklet with friends and family so they can learn the signs of hypothermia.

For information on help in your area

Check with your local Area Agency on Aging.
Look in your phone book or contact:

Eldercare Locator

Toll-free: 1-800-677-1116
www.eldercare.gov

For help with heating bills, the Low-Income Home
Energy Assistance Program has a useful resource:

National Energy Assistance Referral Hotline

Toll-free: 1-866-674-6327
www.ncat.org



To learn more about health and aging,
contact:

**National Institute on Aging
Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

Toll-free: 1-800-222-2225

Toll-free TTY: 1-800-222-4225

www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation

Visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov (www.nihseniorhealth.gov),
a senior-friendly website from the National Institute
on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This
simple-to-use website features health information for
older adults.



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