

Hypothermia

If you are outdoors for recreation, you presumably do not intend to jeopardize your life. Hypothermia may be a new word to you, but it's the only word that describes the rapid, progressive mental and physical collapse accompanying the chilling of the inner core of the human body. Hypothermia is caused by exposure to cold, aggravated by wet, wind, and exhaustion. It is the #1 killer of outdoor recreationists.

Cold kills in two distinct steps:

1. Exposure and exhaustion – The moment your body begins to lose heat faster than it produces it, you are undergoing exposure.
2. Hypothermia – If exposure continues until your energy reserves are exhausted, cold reaches the brain depriving you of judgment and reasoning power (you will not realize this is happening), and you will lose control of your hands. This is hypothermia. Your internal temperature is sliding downward. Without treatment, this slide leads to stupor, collapse, and death.

Your First Line of Defense: Avoid Exposure

1. Stay dry – When clothes get wet, they lose about 90% of their insulating power.

2. Beware of the wind – Wind refrigerates wet clothes by evaporating moisture from the surface.
3. Understand cold – Most hypothermia cases develop in air temperature between 30 and 50 degrees F.
4. Use your clothes – Put raingear on before you get wet, and put outerwear on before you start shivering.

Your Second Line of Defense: Terminate Exposure

1. Be brave enough to give up reaching your hiking goal.
2. Get out of the wind and rain – start your stove and prepare hot drinks. Concentrate on making camp as secure and comfortable as possible.
3. Never ignore shivering – Persistent or violent shivering is a clear warning that you are on the verge of hypothermia.
4. Forestall exhaustion – Make camp while you still have a reserve of energy.

Your Third Line of Defense: Detect Hypothermia

Watch for these symptoms:

1. Uncontrollable fits of shivering
2. Vague, slow, slurred speech
3. Memory lapses
4. Immobile, fumbling hands
5. Frequent stumbling, lurching gait
6. Drowsiness (to sleep is to die)
7. Apparent exhaustion, inability to get up after a rest

Your Fourth Line of Defense: Treatment

The victim may deny he is in trouble. Believe the symptoms, not the patient. Even mild symptoms demand immediate, drastic treatment.

1. Get the victim out of the wind and rain.
2. Strip off all wet clothes.
3. If the patient is only mildly impaired:
 - Give them warm drinks.
 - Get them into dry clothes and a warm sleeping bag.
4. If the patient is semi-conscious or worse:
 - Try to keep them awake
 - Leave them stripped. Put them in a sleeping bag with another person (also stripped). Skin to skin contact is the most effective treatment.
5. Build a fire to warm the camp (if regulations allow).

Information on hypothermia from "Four Lines of Defense Against Hypothermia", published by SAFECO Insurance Companies.

