

Hypothermia

The Bergen County Department of Health Services reminds all residents to protect themselves against hypothermia during cold weather. In cold weather, your body may lose heat faster than you can produce it. The result is hypothermia, or abnormally low body temperature. It can make you sleepy, confused and clumsy. Because it happens gradually and affects your thinking, you may not realize you need help. That makes it especially dangerous. A body temperature below 95° F is a medical emergency and can lead to death if not treated promptly.

Hypothermia is most likely at very cold temperatures, but it can occur even at cool temperatures (above 40°F) if a person becomes chilled from rain, sweat, or submersion in cold water.

Victims of hypothermia are often (1) elderly people with inadequate food, clothing, or heating; (2) babies sleeping in cold bedrooms; (3) people who remain outdoors for long periods—the homeless, hikers, hunters, etc.; and (4) people who drink alcohol or use illicit drugs.

What Are The Signs Of Hypothermia?

When you think about being cold, you probably think of shivering. That is one way the body stays warm when it gets cold. But, shivering alone does not mean you have hypothermia.

How do you know if someone has hypothermia? Look for the “*umbles*”—*stumbles*, *mumbles*, *fumbles*, and *grumbles*—these show that the cold is a problem. Check for:

- Confusion or sleepiness
 - Slowed, slurred speech, or shallow breathing
 - Weak pulse
 - Change in behavior or in the way a person looks
 - A lot of shivering or no shivering; stiffness in the arms or legs
- Poor control over body movements or slow reactions

With infants, also check for:

Bright red, cold skin

Very low energy

Taking Action

A normal body temperature is 98.6°F. A few degrees lower, for example, 95°F, can be dangerous. It may cause an irregular heartbeat leading to heart problems and death.

If you notice any of these signs, take the person’s temperature. If it is below 95°, the situation is an emergency—get medical attention immediately. Call 911.

While you are waiting for help to arrive, keep the person warm and dry. Try and move him or her to a warmer place. Wrap the person in blankets, towels, coats—whatever is handy. Even your own body warmth will help. Lie close, but be gentle. Give the person

something warm to drink but stay away from alcohol or caffeinated drinks, like regular coffee.

How Do I Stay Safe?

- Try to stay away from cold places. Pay attention to how cold it is where you are.
- Check the weather forecasts for windy and cold weather. Try to stay inside or in a warm place on cold and windy days. If you have to go out, wear warm clothes including a hat and gloves. A waterproof coat or jacket can help you stay warm if it's cold and snowy.
- Wear several layers of loose clothing when it's cold. The layers will trap warm air between them. Don't wear tight clothing because it can keep your blood from flowing freely. This can lead to loss of body heat.
- Ask your doctor how the medicines you are taking affect body heat. Some medicines can increase the risk of accidental hypothermia. These include drugs used to treat anxiety, depression, or nausea. Some over-the-counter cold remedies can also cause problems.
- When the temperature has dropped, drink alcohol moderately, if at all. Alcoholic drinks can make you lose body heat.

For more information on hypothermia and protecting yourself from cold weather, log on to the Department of Health Services' website at www.bergenhealth.org. For a print copy of *Keep Warm, be Healthy*, call the Health Promotion Request Line at 201-634-2704.