

Resident's Hypothermia: Prolonged Exposure to Severe Cold Weather

Hypothermia is a potentially life-threatening condition. Clinical hypothermia is defined as having a core body temperature of 35°C or below, and is considered life-threatening at a body temperature of 33°C and below.

Older adults are specifically vulnerable to hypothermia because of normal changes and common health conditions associated with aging. Examples of some health conditions that may make it harder for residents to stay warm are:

- **Thyroid problems:** can make it hard to maintain a normal body temperature.
- **Diabetes:** can keep blood from flowing normally to provide warmth.
- **Parkinson's disease and arthritis:** can make it hard to put on more clothes, use a blanket, or get out of the cold.
- **Memory loss:** can cause a person to go outside without appropriate clothing.
- Taking certain medications and not being active also can affect body heat.

Hypothermia early symptoms	Hypothermia more severe symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vigorous shivering and complaining of the cold• Decreased physical function• Signs of apathy, decreased energy, fatigue• Signs of social withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Weak/intermittent or stopped shivering• Loss of coordination• Sometimes complaining of the cold• Confusion• Sleepiness, unresponsiveness• Slowed/stopped breathing• Body feels stiff• Weak/stopped pulse• Slurred speech• Change in behaviour or appearance• Impaired judgement• Unconscious• Cardiac dysrhythmia• Cardiac arrest

Tips to reduce residents exposure to the cold

- **Stay Indoors.** Cold temperatures, high winds, snow, and rain can all reduce body heat quickly. Wind is especially dangerous because it removes the layer of heated air from around the body. If residents feel they must go outside, don't let them stay out for very long and they should go indoors if they start to shiver. When indoors on cold days, make sure the

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heat is turned on to a comfortable temperature and ensure the furnace and other heating systems are well-maintained.

- **Stay Dry.** Wet clothing chills the body quickly.
- **Wear Layers.** Wearing two or three thinner layers of loose-fitting clothing is warmer than a single layer of thick clothing. Seniors should always wear layers when going outside, as well as a hat, gloves or mittens, a coat and boots, and a scarf to cover the mouth and nose and protect lungs from cold air.

Management:

Once hypothermia is suspected:

1. Get the resident into a warm room.
2. Remove any wet clothing the resident is wearing.
3. Warm the center of the person's body—chest, neck, head, and groin—using an electric blanket, if available. Otherwise, use dry layers of blankets, clothing, towels, or sheets.
4. Warm drinks can help increase body temperature if the person is conscious. Do not try to give beverages to an unconscious person.
5. After body temperature has increased, keep the person dry and wrap their body, including their head and neck, in a warm blanket

Note that a resident with severe hypothermia may be unconscious and may not seem to have a pulse or to be breathing. In this case, handle the resident gently, and get emergency assistance immediately.