

Avoiding Frostbite and Hypothermia

With extreme winter weather chilling much of the country, the Red Cross cautions all Canadians to take a few extra steps to avoid frostbite and hypothermia. Whether participating in outdoor winter activities or traveling, it is important to be prepared and know what to do should something go wrong.

"In weather like this, it is crucial that people prepare adequately before heading outside," says Rick Caissie, National First Aid Manager for Canadian Red Cross. "A little extra thought can make the difference between a safe, enjoyable experience or severe discomfort that may result in injury."

Prevent frostbite and hypothermia

- Wear a hat and clothing made of tightly woven fibers, such as wool, which trap warm air against your body. A few lighter layers protect better than one heavy garment.
- Protect vulnerable areas such as fingers, toes, ears and nose.
- Drink plenty of warm fluids to help the body maintain its temperature.
- If hot drinks are not available, drink plenty of plain water. Avoid caffeine and alcohol, which hinder the body's heat-producing mechanisms and will actually cause the body's core temperature to drop.
- Take frequent breaks from the cold to let your body warm up.

Signs & symptoms of frostbite

- Numbness
- Tingling
- Pain and swelling

As the condition worsens...

- Total loss of sensation
- Pale waxy skin will become dark bluish
- In severe cases, the skin will look burnt and charred.

Do you know what to do for frostbite?

- Cover the affected area.
- Never rub the skin as this may cause further damage.
- Warm the area gently by immersing the affected part in water that is warm and comfortable to the touch. Continue until affected area is warm and looks red.
- Bandage the affected area with a dry sterile dressing.
- Ensure that the affected part does not become frozen again.
- Get the person to a doctor as soon as possible.

Signs & symptoms of hypothermia

- Feeling cold
- Shivering (which will stop as the condition worsens)
- Slurred speech
- Pale skin, bluish lips
- Slow pulse
- Lethargic
- Mood swings
- Unable to think clearly
- Unconsciousness

What should you do for hypothermia?

- Remove wet or cold clothing and replace with warm dry clothing.
- Keep the person warm by wrapping him or her in blankets and moving them to a warm place. Remember to be very gentle in handling the person.
- Never rub the surface of the person's body; this could cause further damage if they are also suffering from frostbite.
- If the person is dry use hot water bottles or heating pads to warm them. Make sure there is a blanket, clothing or towel between the heat source and the person's skin.
- If the person is awake, give warm liquids to drink. Avoid alcohol and caffeine as they can hinder the body's heat-producing mechanisms.