

HEALTH ALERT

2019 Extreme Cold Weather Alert

With current extreme cold weather and snow affecting much of the United States, the Office of Developmental Programs (ODP) is sending this Health Alert as a reminder to all, and particularly to CEOs and Agency Administrators of residential programs, to ensure that necessary precautions are in place to prevent cold-weather-related health risks.

In addition to the following precautions, please check that your sites' heating systems are functioning properly, that your buildings are secure, and emergency intervention/provisions are in place if needed. Confirm that vehicles are ready to transport people when necessary and that emergency backups are in place.

Foremost, the best precaution is to stay indoors whenever possible.

The information below is adapted from comprehensive information available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Please see the CDC website for further information:

Extreme Cold: A Prevention Guide to Promote Your Personal Health and Safety
(<https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/guide.html>)

Exposure to the cold for too long can cause serious health problems. Hypothermia and frostbite are the most common cold-related health problems.

Please use this helpful CDC [infographic on Hypothermia & Frostbite](#) for quick reference (attached).

What is hypothermia?

- **Hypothermia, or abnormally low body temperature, is a dangerous condition that can occur when a person is exposed to extremely cold temperatures.**
- Hypothermia is caused by prolonged exposures to very cold temperatures. When exposed to cold temperatures, your body begins to lose heat **faster** than it's produced.

Lengthy exposures will eventually use up your body's stored energy, which leads to lower body temperature.

- Body temperature that is too low affects the brain, making the victim unable to think clearly or move well. This makes hypothermia especially dangerous, because a person may not know that it's happening and won't be able to do anything about it.

Warning signs of hypothermia:

Adults:

- shivering, exhaustion
- confusion, fumbling hands
- memory loss, slurred speech drowsiness

Infants:

- bright red, cold skin
- very low energy

Don't Wait, Take Action!

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

If medical care is not immediately available, begin warming the person, as follows:

- Get the victim into a warm room or shelter.
- If the victim has on any wet clothing, remove it.
- Warm the center of the body first—chest, neck, head, and groin—using an electric blanket, if available. You can also use skin-to-skin contact under loose, dry layers of blankets, clothing, towels, or sheets.
- Warm beverages can help increase body temperature, but do not give alcoholic beverages. Do not try to give beverages to an unconscious person.
- After body temperature has increased, keep the person dry and wrapped in a warm blanket, including the head and neck.

- **Get medical attention as soon as possible.**

A person with severe hypothermia may be unconscious and may not seem to have a pulse or to be breathing. In this case, handle the victim gently, and get **emergency assistance immediately.**

- Even if the victim appears dead, CPR should be provided. CPR should continue while the victim is being warmed, until the victim responds or medical aid becomes available. In some cases, hypothermia victims who appear to be dead can be successfully resuscitated.

What is Frostbite?

Frostbite is a serious condition that's caused by exposure to extremely cold temperatures. Frostbite is a bodily injury caused by freezing that results in loss of feeling and color in affected areas. It most often affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers, or toes. Frostbite can permanently damage the body, and severe cases can lead to amputation.

You may have a greater risk of developing frostbite if you:

- Have poor blood circulation
- Are not properly dressed for extremely cold temperatures

Recognizing Frostbite

At the first signs of redness or pain in any skin area, get out of the cold or protect any exposed skin—frostbite may be beginning. Any of the following signs may indicate frostbite:

- a white or grayish-yellow skin area
- skin that feels unusually firm or waxy
- numbness

A victim is often unaware of frostbite until someone else points it out because the frozen tissues are numb.

What to Do

If you detect symptoms of frostbite, seek medical care. First determine whether the victim also shows signs of [hypothermia](https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/staysafe/hypothermia.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/staysafe/hypothermia.html>). Hypothermia is a more serious medical condition and requires emergency medical assistance.

If (1) there is frostbite but no sign of hypothermia and (2) immediate medical care is not available, proceed as follows:

- Get into a warm room as soon as possible.
- Unless absolutely necessary, do not walk on frostbitten feet or toes—this increases the damage.
- Immerse the affected area in warm—not hot—water (the temperature should be comfortable to the touch for unaffected parts of the body).
- Or, warm the affected area using body heat. For example, the heat of an armpit can be used to warm frostbitten fingers.
- Do not rub the frostbitten area with snow or massage it at all. This can cause more damage.
- Don't use a heating pad, heat lamp, or the heat of a stove, fireplace, or radiator for warming. Affected areas are numb and can be easily burned.

These procedures are not substitutes for proper medical care. Hypothermia is a medical emergency and frostbite should be evaluated by a health care provider.