

Hypothermia Fact Sheet

HS04-005D (12-22)

Hypothermia is a serious health hazard that occurs when a person's core body temperature drops below 96°F. This can happen during prolonged exposure to temperatures as warm as 60°F, particularly in water, or after a few minutes in low temperatures when a person is not dressed for the weather.



Who is at risk?

About 1,500 people die from hypothermia in the U.S. each year.¹ Among the most at risk are:

- older adults with inadequate food, clothing, or heating;
- people who remain outdoors for long periods, such as the homeless, hikers, and hunters;
- people who drink alcohol or use illicit drugs; and
- babies sleeping in cold bedrooms.²

Some medicines, problems with circulation, and certain illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and hypertension may also reduce a person's ability to resist hypothermia.³ However, hypothermia can happen to anyone exposed to temperatures that lower their core body temperature for a prolonged period. Therefore, **employers and employees who work outdoors in cold weather or indoors in refrigerated areas should take precautions against hypothermia.**

What are the symptoms of hypothermia?

One of the main dangers of hypothermia is that an early symptom is **mental confusion**. Since the body's temperature drop may be gradual, a person may not know a problem exists. Other symptoms of hypothermia include:

- **shivering;**
- **exhaustion;**
- **fumbling hands;**
- **memory loss;**
- **slurred speech;**
- **drowsiness; and**
- **pink or red cold skin.**

How to treat hypothermia: Act quickly!

Hypothermia is a medical emergency. If a person has any of the following signs and



If you feel cold and sluggish or are having trouble thinking clearly, try to warm yourself and go to the nearest emergency room. It is better to be overly cautious than to die of hypothermia.

How to prevent hypothermia

These tips can help employers, workers, and others reduce the risks of hypothermia:

- **Check local weather forecasts**

Prepare for the workday by checking the temperature and wind chill forecast. Try to schedule work for the warmest part of the day. A strong wind, even in moderately cool weather, can cause a wind chill far below freezing.

- **Dress in layers.**

Layer clothing to adjust to changing environmental temperatures and cold, wet, and windy conditions. Wear polypropylene underwear to keep water away from the skin. Use a hat, gloves, and a cold-weather mask as needed to preserve body heat.

- **Take frequent breaks.**

Allow workers to take frequent short breaks in warm, dry shelters in the winter. Energy is needed to keep muscles warm enough to avoid fatigue and exhaustion.

- **Teach workers the signs of cold-induced illnesses and injuries.**

Watch for hypothermia symptoms including confusion, drowsiness, slurred speech, drop in blood pressure, shallow breathing, and a pinkish or redish tint to the skin.

a temperature below 96° F, get medical attention immediately!

- Call 911 for an ambulance.
- Get the person into a warm room or shelter.
- Remove any wet clothing the person is wearing.
- Warm the center of the person's body—chest, neck, head, and groin—using an electric blanket, if available.
- If electric blankets are unavailable, use skin-to-skin contact. Lie close to the person and cover both of you with thick blankets, clothing, towels, or sheets. (The hotter you get, the more warmth you can give the other person.)
- If the person is unconscious, administer CPR. Continue to try to warm the person while giving CPR until medical aid arrives. (In some cases, hypothermia victims who appear to be without a pulse or are not breathing can be successfully resuscitated.)
- If the person is alert, provide warm, non-alcoholic drinks to help increase the body's temperature.

- **Use the buddy system.**
Work in pairs so that one worker can recognize danger signs in another.
- **Drink plenty of fluids.**
Drink warm, sweet fluids. Avoid drinks with caffeine or alcohol.
- **Eat warm foods.**
Eat hot, nutritious, high-calorie foods several times during the day.
- **Ask about medications.**
Ask your doctor if any medicine you are taking increases your risk of hypothermia. Drugs that may cause

a problem include barbiturates, benzodiazepines, chlorpromazine, reserpine, and tricyclic antidepressants.

For more information on workplace safety during the winter, stream any of the Texas Department of Insurance, Division of Workers' Compensation (DWC)-Workplace Safety's free cold-weather workplace safety [videos](#) or download the following publications:

- **Cold Stress Fact Sheet**
([English/Spanish](#))
- **Winter Storm Safety Fact Sheet**
([English/Spanish](#))



References

- ¹ Brown DJ, Brugger H, Boyd J, Paal P (November 2012). "Accidental hypothermia." *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 367 (20): 1930-8. Web. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23150960/>. Accessed December 21, 2022.
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- ³ American Heart Association. "Cold Weather and Cardiovascular Disease." Website. <https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/consumer-healthcare/what-is-cardiovascular-disease/cold-weather-and-cardiovascular-disease>. Accessed December 21, 2022.



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1-800-252-7031, Option 2

*The Texas Department of Insurance,
Division of Workers' Compensation (DWC)-Workplace Safety
P.O. Box 12050
Austin, TX 78711-2050*

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