

Hypothermia: a silent killer

MEDIA — Hypothermia is caused by prolonged exposure to the cold, but it doesn't take sub-zero temperatures. Also known as cold exposure, hypothermia is the lowering of the body's inner core temperature to dangerous levels—typically 95°F or below.

While extended exposure to the cold can harm anyone, it is particularly hazardous to the elderly. Nearly half of all hypothermia victims are over 65.

Hypothermia can be prevented. Dressing warmly during the day

and while sleeping, eating enough of the proper foods, and staying as active as possible are good ways to maintain body heat. If possible older persons should not be alone for very long or should ask friends or neighbors to look in on them once or twice a day, particularly in severe cold weather. In some communities, telephone check-in or personal visit services are available.

In addition, some diseases and certain drugs can increase susceptibility to hypothermia. Check

with your doctor if you are taking medication to treat anxiety, depression, or nausea. Such drugs sometimes influence body temperature regulations.

One of the first signs of hypothermia is uncontrolled shivering, the body's mechanism to create heat. Other symptoms are numbness and drowsiness, staggering, and failing eyesight, all leading to unconsciousness.

The temperature doesn't have to be below zero for hypothermia to set in. Exposure to moisture on chilly days can also lead to hypothermia. Wet

clothing is a major factor in accidental hypothermia. Wet clothing can extract heat from the body 240 times faster than dry clothes.

In cold weather, wear several thin layers of clothing, rather than one bulky layer. Several layers retain body heat more effectively. If it is rainy, we stress the importance of a parka or a down coat with a tight, synthetic covering that resists moisture. Cotton clothing in cold, wet weather can quickly become cold, wet clothing. Wool or synthetic materials will

resist moisture.

But wet clothing is not the only way body heat is taken away, says Mrs. Dorricott. Human heat naturally radiates from the body—from the head, in particular. An uncovered head can consume up to 75 percent of the body's heat. Body heat is lost through conduction. Touching metal in cold weather draws heat from the body.

The fourth way is evaporation. When you work up a sweat, evaporation takes heat from the body. Simply breathing also allows heat to escape and "convection"—the chilling effect of wind—intensifies the loss of body heat. Proper clothing, food supply, shelter and knowledge, topped with common sense, are the crucial components of a safe venture in the cold.

If you suspect hypothermia, try to reach warm shelter as soon as possible. Drink warm, non-alcoholic beverages and wrap yourself in blankets. If a hypothermia victim is unconscious, but breathing, bring him to a warm shelter and wrap him in blankets; when the victim regain consciousness and can swallow, give him warm drinks. If the victim is not breathing, give artificial respiration.

Hunters, hikers, backpackers, cross-country skiers, and snowmobilers, should be aware of this hazard. Always inform someone that you are going, and when you plan to return. Have them check to make sure you return safely.

To avoid hypothermia try to be warm and comfortable. Weather

can be very unpredictable. Wear layers of clothing that you can adjust to the temperature conditions. A spare windproof parka can be very useful.

Secondly, carry high-energy supplies like peanuts and chocolate.

Also remember to take along matches or a lighter in a water-proof container, a candle, plastic tarp, a signal mirror, and first aid kit. If you are going into unfamiliar terrain, a compass and topographic map are must.


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