



Office of the Ombudsman for Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities



Hypothermia Alert

This Medical Alert is based on the work of the Medical Review Subcommittee and should be posted prominently. The Office of the Ombudsman for Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities works to improve the services provided to people with disabilities by communicating important information found in the Medical Review Subcommittee's reviews of deaths and serious injuries. Thank you for promptly reporting deaths and serious injuries. You are helping us to meet our mission.

Hypothermia occurs when the body's core temperature drops below 95 degrees Fahrenheit or 35 degrees Celsius. This happens when the rate of heat loss exceeds the rate of heat production. Hypothermia can occur in either indoor or outdoor situations. It can quickly become life threatening.

Prevention

Review the accompanying wind chill chart and stay inside when there are dangerous wind chills.

Wear layers of clothing.

Stay dry.

Wear a hat. Greater than 50% of body heat is lost through the head.

People most likely to experience hypothermia include:

- Very old or very young
- Chronically ill, especially with heart or circulation problems
- Malnourished
- Overly tired
- Under the influence of alcohol or drugs

Conditions Leading To Hypothermia

Cold temperatures, especially when there is a wind.

Improper clothing.

Wet clothing.

Fatigue, exhaustion, or chronic illness.

Inadequate food intake.

Dehydration – Moisture is lost with each breath and also from sweating. There is a strong connection between fluid loss and heat loss.

Alcohol intake causes blood vessels to dilate, thereby releasing more heat.

Certain drugs, such as phenothiazines and barbiturates, can prevent normal body responses to cold temperatures.

What To Look For

Mild Hypothermia:

Confusion: watch for the “-umbles” – stumbles, mumbles, fumbles, and grumbles.

Shivering, memory lapses.

Cold abdomen and back.

Severe or Profound Hypothermia:

Shivering has stopped.

Skin is ice cold and has a blue appearance.

Muscles may be stiff and rigid.

Pulse and breathing slow down; pupils dilate.

The victim may appear to be dead.

What To Do

If any symptoms of hypothermia are present, especially confusion or changes in mental status, immediately call 911.

Stop further heat loss. Take the person inside to a comfortably heated room and cover him or her with warm blankets. If going indoors is not possible, get the person out of the wind and use a blanket to provide insulation from the cold ground. Cover the person's head and neck to help retain body heat.

Replace wet clothing with dry clothing.

Handle the victim very gently. Rough handling can cause cardiac arrest.

Maintain the victim in a horizontal (flat) position.

If the person is unconscious, check airway, breathing, and circulation (ABCs of CPR). If necessary, begin rescue breathing or CPR. If the victim is breathing less than six (6) breaths per minute, begin rescue breathing.

Note: A hypothermic victim will have a very slow pulse rate.

Warm the person. If necessary, use your own body heat to aid the warming. Apply warm compresses to the neck, chest wall, and groin.

Stay with the person until medical help arrives.

DO NOT allow the victim to engage in physical exertion.

DO NOT put an unconscious victim in a bathtub.

DO NOT give the victim alcohol since it will interfere with shivering.

DO NOT give a warm drink – warm drinks send a message to the brain to send more blood to the skin, producing a warm feeling and some heat loss.

DO NOT give a caffeine drink. Caffeine has a diuretic effect, and the victim will probably already be dehydrated.

DO NOT rub or massage the victim's arms or legs.

DO NOT use direct heat (such as hot water, a heating pad, or a heat lamp) to warm the person.

Additional information is available at:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000038.htm>

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