

Brrrrrrrrrr!

It's the dead of winter, and you need to run to the mailbox or let your dog out. It's just a minute, you think. A sweater and sandals will be fine.

Not so fast, says Maddy Draper, APRN, a health care provider at OSF OnCall who sees cold weather injuries often. She says exposure to frigid temperatures can have serious consequences.

Types of cold weather injuries

- Frostnip: Draper says this is a mild form of frostbite where exposure to cold temperatures turns the skin pink or red. Your skin may feel burning or numb.

"The numbness typically goes away with rewarming," Draper says.

- Frostbite: This is a more severe case of cold exposure. Your skin may be numb and appear yellow, white, gray or black. It may feel waxy and have blisters.
- Hypothermia: This is when the body's temperature drops below 95 degrees.

"There are different stages," Draper explains. "The first is our natural response of shivering. It gets more severe. The person may get confused and have lethargy, memory loss and slurred speech. It can lead to a coma and death."

Inside, too?

Yes, there's a risk for these injuries inside, too, Draper says. Notably, there have been cases of infants getting hypothermia.

"The room may be too cold, and they're not dressed appropriately," Draper says. "If they're in a bassinet or crib with just a onesie and it's cold, that can lead to hypothermia."

Signs of infant hypothermia are bright red skin and decreased energy. Sleep experts use a [thermal overall grade scale \(TOG\)](#) to suggest how much clothing a baby should wear to sleep depending on the temperature of the room.

Treatment

Draper says she usually sees cases of frostbite and hypothermia sent to the emergency department. Providers will rewarm you with warm water or blankets and may provide warm liquids to drink, warmed oxygen through a mask and nasal tube or heated fluids through an intravenous line (IV) or other methods. Medication can also help with pain and blood flow.

"The hospital has more imaging resources to see the impact of the tissue damage," compared to urgent care, Draper says.

For frostnip, you can take steps to warm up at home.

"It's not as fast as possible. It's not as hot as possible. It's just that gradual warming," Draper says. "Get off your cool or wet clothes immediately. You don't want to stick your hands or feet into hot, steaming water. Just warm water."

That's because hot water can burn your skin. And if your skin is numb, you may not feel the burn before the damage is done. If water is not available, you can place your hands in your armpits. And handle the sensitive skin gently. Don't rub or massage it. If your feet are affected, get off your feet.

Prevention

Draper says older adults, people who work or do activities outside (like hunters or hikers), unhoused people and people with medical conditions (like peripheral artery disease, diabetes and Raynaud's disease) are at a higher risk of cold weather injuries. Getting stranded in a vehicle without proper protection is also common in the winter. Drinking alcohol or using drugs may lead to you losing consciousness outside. And smoking impacts blood circulation, putting you at a higher risk, Draper says.

Some ways to beat the cold:

- Dress in layers. You can always take a layer off, but you can't put one on if you leave it at home. Make a hat, scarf, gloves and winter boots part of your wardrobe. Make sure the clothes aren't too tight to allow for blood circulation. And look for water-resistant garments when buying clothes.
- Have winter weather supplies, like blankets, flares, a first aid kit and food, in your vehicle.
- Be well fed and hydrated. Body fat, though unhealthy in excess, helps us stay warm. For drinks, avoid alcohol and caffeinated beverages.
- During outdoor activities, take breaks and go with a buddy. Keep a close eye on kids who may not realize how cold they are. Come inside to change from wet to dry clothes. Let others know your plans and when you'll be back. If you're not back in time, that's a sign you may have fallen victim to the cold, and help should be sent.