

HEALTH DEPARTMENT ADVISES RESIDENTS ON COLD WEATHER SAFETY

When temperatures drop below freezing and wind chills fall below zero, Bergen County Department of Health Services reminds residents of health and safety precautions to take during periods of cold weather.

Serious health dangers can occur quickly if one is unprepared and exposed to cold weather. Knowing what precautions to take during periods of intense cold can be a matter of life and death. People should dress in warm layers and cover up as much as possible. The elderly and infants are particularly vulnerable to the cold due to body heat loss.

Body heat can be retained most effectively by:

- Wearing a hat, or scarf, because most body heat is lost from the head;
- Wearing layers of clothing rather than a single item, since layers provide better insulation and therefore better warmth;
- Keeping clothing dry and changing out of wet clothes as soon as possible.

Severe body heat loss can lead to hypothermia, a potentially life threatening condition in which the body temperature drops below 96 degrees F. The critical symptom to watch out for is confusion or mental disorientation, often accompanied by fatigue and irregular heartbeat. Hypothermia victims should be brought someplace warm, but treatment for hypothermia varies depending on the victim and, therefore, medical advice should always be sought.

Another dangerous cold-weather condition is frostbite, which can affect any exposed area of the body—most frequently fingers, toes, ears, and nose. Frostbite-affected areas of the body should be warmed quickly, but carefully. Intense heat must be avoided. Like hypothermia, frostbite should be treated promptly and by trained professionals.

Use of alcoholic beverages should be moderated when the weather is cold. Alcohol increases risk for hypothermia and frostbite, and can make those conditions worse for a person who has them.

Finally, precautions must be taken when staying indoors during cold weather:

- Furnaces should be inspected and cleaned if necessary;

- Electric heaters should be used only with extreme care to avoid shock, fire, and burn hazards;
- Gas ovens or burners should never be used for heating purposes.
- Candles should never be left unattended, and should always be placed away from flammable objects.

Winter snow and ice can pose a number of problems on the road and at home. If possible, avoid driving when storms leave roads slick and icy. Use caution when shoveling snow, since it may cause undue stress on the heart, particularly in individuals who do not exercise regularly. Wearing appropriate footwear and proceeding with caution on icy steps and walkways can help prevent falls and other injuries.



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