

STAYING SAFE (AND WARM!) THIS WINTER

Ice skating, snowball fights, sledding, warming up by the fire... aaah, the joys of winter! It's fine to indulge in these cold-weather activities if you are also vigilant about your safety.

Hypothermia most often results from remaining in cold temperatures for an extended period of time. If your body loses heat faster than it can produce heat, your core body temperature may drop dangerously below 95 degrees, and the brain will begin to "shut down" for its own protection. Ironically, the initial signs of hypothermia – confusion, poor decision making, lack of energy, or drowsiness – may prevent recognition of the problem itself.

Before venturing outdoors, dress yourself from head to toe in multiple layers of loose-fitting, lightweight clothing, with earmuffs, hats, and gloves. Keep hands and feet as dry as possible, and avoid strenuous activities that would cause you to sweat. Take frequent "warming" breaks inside, and remove all wet clothing and accessories as soon as you come indoors.

If someone has been exposed to the elements appears to be shivering, confused, slurring their speech, or has a weak pulse or labored breathing, call for emergency assistance. Once indoors, remove wet clothing and warm them with layers of dry clothing, blankets, and warm, non-alcoholic, caffeine-free liquids. If shelter is unavailable, provide as much protection from the cold and wind as possible. Avoid unnecessary movement, massage, rubbing, or application of direct heat via electric blankets or heat packs.

Although hypothermia most often occurs outdoors, mild cases can develop in a cold house during a power outage or when sleeping in a very cold bedroom. Certain medical conditions can affect the body's ability to regulate and maintain its temperature, and use of drugs or alcohol can negatively affect good judgment. Children lose body heat faster than adults, and youngsters and older adults may not be able to recognize or communicate their discomfort or distress.

If you heat your home with wood, have your chimney inspected and cleaned by a specialist each year. Keep the area well-ventilated and clear of flammable material, and use only dry, seasoned hardwood in your fireplace or wood stove. Stack firewood outdoors a safe distance away from the house, keep the roof clear of leaves and debris, and dispose of completely cooled ashes in a tightly covered metal container. Be certain that functional smoke alarms with new batteries are installed on every level of your home. No matter how many safety mechanisms are in place, never leave a fire unattended!

Candles cause more than 15,000 house fires every year. Keep lit candles within view, on a stable, heat-resistant surface, a safe distance from draperies and flammable material that is inaccessible to children and pets. Burn candles in a well-ventilated room away from drafts, vents, and fans. Keeping a candle's wick trimmed to ¼ of an inch will promote even burning. Use a snuffer to extinguish the flame, and refrain from moving until the melted wax regains its solid form.

Don't let winter weather get the best of you! Outdoor activities and indoor warmth are all possible with proper preparation, vigilance, and "safety sense."