

## Know how to keep safe, healthy in cold weather

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

**W**hen the weather outside is frightful, keeping healthy and safe can be delightful — if you've planned ahead. During times of extremely cold weather, a few preventive measures taken before the temperature drops or the first flake falls can reduce your risk of weather-related health problems.

When you're exposed to cold temperatures, your body begins to lose heat faster than it can produce it. From Jack Frost nipping at your nose to the serious medical conditions frostbite and hypothermia, exposure to the cold can be dangerous and even life-threatening. While winter is the most treacherous time of year for cold-related health emergencies, the



mercury can dip to unsafe levels at other times of the year, too, as many a camper, swimmer or hiker will attest. In warmer climates, even a mild cold snap can cause health emergencies for people who aren't accustomed to it or who have certain conditions such as reduced blood circulation.

"It's important to recognize that cold weather is very dangerous," says John Lindsay, MCP, assistant professor in the Department of Applied Disaster and Emergency

Studies at Brandon University in Manitoba, Canada, and a member of the American Red Cross' Scientific Advisory Council.

Thinking ahead is the key to staying safe and healthy in cold weather, Lindsay says.

"Cold weather, especially winter storms, usually gives us some warning...so we should try to be better prepared," Lindsay says. "If possible, we should stay off the roads before it gets bad. We should make sure we've got the supplies we need in our homes before we need them. And we should dress properly before we go out. Even if it's fine when you're leaving, if you know weather is going to pack in over the next few hours of the day, take the extra warm clothing with you."



### Bundle up and stay warm

You've heard it before, and it's true: When it's cold, you need to dress in layers. Be sure the outer layer of your clothing is tightly woven to reduce body-heat loss. And choose clothing that resists moisture, as wet clothes increase the chance of heat loss. Even perspiration will increase heat loss, so dressing in layers allows you to remove some clothing when you get too warm. Moisture-resistant coats and jackets, hats, scarves, gloves, mittens and boots that are insulated are good outer layer items.

"A lot of people underestimate the cold weather," Lindsay says. "They get bundled up in their home before they go out and they feel too hot...so they take off that scarf or they leave the hat behind. Or they go outside and they're shoveling or building a snowman and



>> For more cold weather tips, visit [www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/winter](http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/winter)

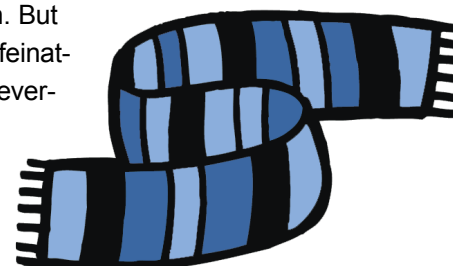
they're feeling too warm. They underestimate just how bad the cold can be, and then they're stuck waiting for a bus or stuck with their car and that cold really seeps in."

If you have to shovel snow, take frequent breaks and avoid exertion. Your body is already working harder to stay warm, and cold weather puts an extra strain on your heart. Also, keeping some sand or cat litter handy to scatter on icy patches can help prevent falls.

According to the National Safety Council, frostbite is the most common injury caused by exposure to extreme cold. Children are at greatest risk because they lose heat from their skin faster and often will ignore the discomfort of frostbite because they're having so much fun outside in the snow. Keep your children safe by bringing them in at regular intervals and checking for signs of frostbite, which often affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers or toes. Frostbite's warning signs include skin that feels numb, is unusually firm or waxy and looks white or grayish-yellow.

About 600 people die each year in the United States from hypothermia, or abnormally low body temperature. Symptoms include shivering, confusion, memory loss, drowsiness and slurred speech.

Luckily, frostbite and hypothermia are preventable. Plan ahead: Avoid being outdoors during the coldest part of the day and dress appropriately. Drink warm beverages such as hot cider or broth. But steer clear of caffeinated or alcoholic beverages, which cause your body to lose heat faster.



### Take care when in your car

If you absolutely have to travel on snowy or icy roads, make sure you tell someone the route you're taking and when you're likely to arrive so that they can be expecting you. Have a cell phone with you so you can call for help if you get stuck. According to AAA Mid-Atlantic, extremely cold temperatures make cars more likely to break down if proper maintenance has not been performed, and poor conditions can lead to vehicles sliding off the road and becoming stuck in the snow.

"Roadside assistance calls go up when the weather gets bad," says Kristin Nevels, MA, spokeswoman for AAA Mid-Atlantic. "It's important to be prepared. If the weather is too bad, stay in if you don't have to go out."

AAA urges motorists to have an emergency winter driving kit in their car with jumper cables, blankets, gloves, hats, a small shovel, first aid kit, water, sand or kitty litter, ice scraper, flashlight, emergency flares or reflectors, water and snacks.

If you do become snowbound, stay with your vehicle. It will provide temporary shelter and make it easier for rescuers to locate you.



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