



Extreme cold, protect yourself while keeping active

Extreme cold events occur when temperatures drop significantly below average during winter. Exposure to cold temperatures, whether indoors or outside, can cause serious or life-threatening health problems. You should know how to protect yourself and your family while still enjoying an active life-style.

Are you at risk? During extreme cold weather, everyone is at risk, but some groups are more vulnerable than others. They include:

- Infants (younger than one year of age).
- People 65 years of age or older.
- Homeless people.
- Outdoor workers.
- Outdoor sport enthusiasts (snowshoers, skiers, joggers).
- People living in homes that are poorly insulated or without heat.
- People living in homes without power (usually due to weather-related events or which have been disconnected by the power utility company).
- People with certain medical conditions such as diabetes and diseases affecting the blood vessels.
- People taking certain medications.

Health risks of extreme cold

Know how to recognize the signs:

Hypothermia: Symptoms/signs include: shivering, exhaustion, confusion, fumbling, unco-ordinated movements, memory loss, slurred speech, drowsiness.

Frostbite: Symptoms/signs include white or greyish skin area, skin that feels unusually firm or waxy, or numbness.

There are numerous steps you can take both before and during extreme cold events:

Things You Can Do to Protect Yourself

- Know the weather forecast and prepare your activity accordingly.
- Know your limits.
- Know how to properly dress for the conditions.

Dress appropriately when going outside (wear several layers of loose-fitting clothes, hats, scarves, mittens, etc.) and cover up all exposed skin. In extreme cold, frostbite can occur within minutes.

- You lose a great deal of body heat from your head and neck. Cover them well.
- Take breaks in heated buildings (your home, friend or family's place, public buildings such as malls, libraries, etc.)
- Drink warm fluids but avoid caffeinated beverages or alcohol because they cause your body to lose heat rapidly.

Things you can do to help others

Check on older friends, relatives, neighbours or people with disabilities who live alone. When the weather turns extremely cold, offer to run errands for them.

Things you can do to prepare

At home:

- Make sure your house is as well insulated as possible before winter starts.
- An electric space heaters with automatic shut-off will enable you to heat only the space you are occupying.
- Have blankets. An electric blanket is also a good way of keeping yourself warm without heating the entire room.
- Dress more warmly than usual at home.

In case of a power failure

- Have alternate means of heating with sufficient fuel, such as a wood or a fuel burning heater. Make sure the alternative source of heat is CSA-approved for indoor use and works well.
 - » Use this type of heater in a well ventilated area and as per manufacturer's recommendation.
 - » Install a fire alarm and carbon monoxide alarm in rooms where this type of heater will be used.

In the car:

- Travel with a charged cell phone (if you have one).
- Let someone know what your destination is and when you are expected to arrive.
- Have with you in the car the following items:
 - » warm clothing (mitts, hat, jacket). Never rely on a car for heat since it may break down.
 - » Signalling device, such as road flares.
 - » Booster cables.
 - » Keep some hand warmers (Hot Shots) in the glove compartment.
 - » Flash light.
 - » Container of water and high energy bars.

Additional resources:

- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, Cold Environments: http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/phys_agents/cold_health.html
- Health Canada, Your Health in Extreme Cold: http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/alt_formats/pdf/iyh-vsv/environ/cold-extreme-froid-eng.pdf
- Environment Canada, Weather: www.weatheroffice.gc.ca/canada_e.html
- Transport Canada, Winter Driving: <http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/roadsafety/safevehicles-safetyfeatures-winterdriving-index-693.htm>