



# Hypothermia

## What is Hypothermia?

Hypothermia is a condition where the body gets too cold. A body temperature below 96° F may seem like just a couple of degrees below a normal temperature of 98.6°, but it can be dangerous.

## What are the symptoms?

When you think about being cold, you probably think of shivering. That is one thing the body does when it gets cold. It is one way the body warms itself back up again. So how can you tell if someone has hypothermia?

- Watch out for the “umbles”: Stumbles, Mumbles, Fumbles and Grumbles; these show how the cold is affecting a person’s muscles and nerves.
- Other changes you might notice are:
  - Confusion or sleepiness
  - Slowed, slurred speech or shallow breathing
  - Weak pulse or low blood pressure
  - A lot of shivering, or no shivering because of stiffness in the arms and legs
  - Slow reactions because of not being able to control body movements as well as usual

## What things put me at risk?

If you have water on your skin, you can lose body heat as much as 25 times faster.  
**Stay Dry=Stay Alive!**

If you are in a cold room or outside, your body heat will blow away more quickly as well. The clothes you wear can make you colder or help keep you warm. Tight clothes may not let your blood flow freely, which can make you lose body heat. Several layers of loose clothes will trap warm air between them and help keep you warm.

If you don’t eat well, you might have less fat under your skin. Fat can protect your body by keeping the heat inside. Make sure you are eating enough of the right food to keep you at a healthy weight.

Changes in your body as you get older might make it harder to feel when you are getting cold. It may also get harder for your body to warm itself. Always be aware of how cold it is around you.

Illnesses like diabetes, hyperthyroidism, and some skin problems may also make it harder for the body to keep or get warm. Arthritis, Parkinson’s, memory problems, strokes and paralysis can make it difficult to move around and stay warm. Medicines may also affect how your body reacts to the cold. If you take medication for high blood

pressure, nervousness, depression or sleeping disorder, and you have trouble keep warm, check with your doctor.

Drinks with alcohol or caffeine can make you lose body heat faster. Avoid drinking alcohol before bedtime when it gets colder both inside and outside. Smoking also can cause your body to lose heat.

Living in a colder house or apartment can lead to illness. Set your thermostat for at least 68°F to 70°F. If your home loses power, try to stay with a relative or a friend.

- Avoid using space heaters; some types are fire hazards.
- If you do use a space heater
  - Make sure it has been approved by a recognized testing laboratory.
  - Choose the right size heater for the space you are heating.
  - Keep anything that might catch fire away from the space heater.
  - Keep the door to the rest of the house open for good airflow.
  - Turn the heater off when you leave the room or go to bed.
  - Make sure your smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors are working.
  - Keep the right type of fire extinguisher nearby.

## How do I treat Hypothermia?

Call 911.

If you notice hypothermia when it first starts to set in, add extra layers of dry clothing, try to get the person moving around more, and get out of the cold. It is also good to drink warm or hot liquids (like caffeine-free teas or soups, but avoid coffee or tea with caffeine) and eat. Body to body contact or another heat source can warm up the body.

If you think a person has severe hypothermia, get them to an Emergency Room or call 911. If you can not get to an Emergency Room right away or have to wait for an ambulance follow these suggestions.

- Make sure he or she is dry. Any moisture on the skin can cause more heat loss.
- Use multiple sleeping bags or wool blankets or clothing to wrap the person and keep from losing more heat. The goal is first to stop the temperature drop and then start re-warming afterwards.
- Allow the person to urinate before wrapping him or her. The body will use more heat keeping a full bladder warm than it will to protect vital organs.
- Warm sugar water may be given to the person; if a person has severe hypothermia, his or her stomach has shut down and will not process solid food, but it can absorb sugar and warm water. Watered-down Jell-O (not full strength) may also be given to the person.
- Heat packs, hot water bottles, or warm compresses should be applied to the neck, armpits, and groin. A lot of blood pumps through these areas, and the person will warm up faster and safer by warming the blood there.

- Be careful to warm these areas first; if you warm the arms and legs first, the cold blood that has been sitting in those areas may rush to the rest of the body, and that is very dangerous.

As always, the best treatment is prevention. If at any time you discover a cold injury, stop and re-warm that area unless doing so puts you at greater risk. A “buddy system” is also useful, as you can watch each other’s faces, cheeks or ears for signs of cold injuries. Be aware, be safe, and keep warm.