

NEWS RELEASE
Protecting Older Adults From Hypothermia
2/19/08

Hypothermia is a serious condition in which the body gets cold and loses heat faster than it can be regenerated. It usually occurs when a person is exposed to cold air, water, wind or rain for a long period of time.

Hypothermia is most commonly associated with outdoor activities, but it can develop indoors as well and endanger older adults.

Although almost anyone can get hypothermia, it is most dangerous for older adults, those who are ill and young infants. They are especially at risk indoors if they are not dressed properly or the room is kept at a cool temperature, noted the New York State Department of Health officials.

You can avoid the life-threatening risks of hypothermia by following a few simple precautions.

Health officials recommend that older adults set their indoor temperature at 68 Fahrenheit or higher. If necessary to maintain warmth in living areas, close off any rooms not in use, and keep blinds and curtains closed to avoid losing heat through windows. It is also helpful to wear several layers of clothing during the day and use extra blankets at night to maintain body heat.

People who have older relatives or neighbors should keep a close eye on them during the winter. Hypothermia can set in if you are exposed to temperatures long enough to drop your core body temperature below 95 degrees Fahrenheit, officials said.

Hypothermia is an emergency medical condition. Unconsciousness, and ultimately death, can result if its symptoms aren't quickly recognized. There are many warning signs to look for, both immediately after hypothermia has set in, and also when it becomes more advanced.

It's important to catch hypothermia in its early stages. Look for signs such as shivering, discolored skin, apathy, poor judgment, mild unsteady balance, slurred speech, or numb hands and fingers. Other signs to look for include the trunk of the body being cold, stiff muscles, slow pulse, shallow breathing, weakness or fatigue, confusion, or lack of shivering after the body temperature falls below 90 degrees Fahrenheit.

There are differing methods of medical treatment for hypothermia, depending on its severity. If hypothermia is at an early stage, it can often be treated at home. This is done by removing the person from the cold or wet environment, then using warm blankets, heaters and hot water bottles.

Treatment in a hospital is usually necessary if the person has been experiencing hypothermia for a long period of time and does not respond to initial care.

For more information on hypothermia and protecting older adults from it, call the Greene County Public Health Nursing Service at 518-719-3600, or visit the New York State Health Department web site at www.nyhealth.gov.