

NEWS RELEASE
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Tips to avoid cold weather-related illnesses

(Lawrence, KS) – With below-freezing temperatures and cold wind-chills forecast for coming days, the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department encourages residents to be cautious when outside.

Director of Clinic Services Linda Craig, a registered nurse, said prolonged exposure to the cold could cause serious health problems, most commonly frostbite and hypothermia.

“Winter weather can bring extremely dangerous conditions, especially for infants and older adults,” Craig said.

For example, infants lose body heat more easily than adults, and they typically lack the ability to shiver and generate heat. Older adults often make less body heat because of a slower metabolism and less physical activity.

Craig said it is important to factor in the Wind Chill Index — the temperature your body feels when the air temperature is combined with the wind speed. In Kansas and the Midwest, high winds and a low wind-chill can make conditions more likely for serious weather-related health problems, even when temperatures are only cool.

Here are some tips to keep safe this winter season:

Dress properly

- Adults and children should wear: a hat, scarf or knit mask to cover face and mouth, sleeves that are snug at the wrist, mittens (they are warmer than gloves), water-resistant coat and shoes and several layers of loose-fitting clothing.
- Stay dry. Wet clothing chills the body rapidly. Excess perspiration will also increase heat loss. Remove extra layers of clothing whenever you feel too warm.
- Do not ignore shivering. It’s an important first sign that the body is losing heat. Persistent shivering is a signal to return indoors.

Avoid hypothermia

When exposed to cold temperatures, your body will lose heat faster than it can be produced. The result is hypothermia, or abnormally low body temperature. Body temperature that is too low affects the brain, making the victim unable to think clearly or move well. This makes hypothermia particularly dangerous because a person may not know it is happening and won’t be able to do anything about it.

Warnings signs of hypothermia:

- Adults — shivering, exhaustion, confusion, fumbling hands, memory loss, slurred speech and drowsiness.
- Infants — bright red, cold skin and very low energy.

If you notice any of these signs, take the person's temperature. If it is below 95 degrees, the situation is an emergency.

Avoid frostbite

Frostbite is an injury to the body that is caused by freezing. Frostbite causes a loss of feeling and color in affected areas. It most often affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers or toes. Frostbite can permanently damage the body, and severe cases can lead to amputation. The risk of frostbite is increased in people with reduced blood circulation and among people who are not dressed properly for extremely cold temperatures.

At the first signs of redness or pain in any skin area, get out of the cold or protect any exposed skin. Any of the following signs may indicate frostbite:

- a white or grayish-yellow skin area
- skin that feels unusually firm or waxy
- numbness

A victim is often unaware of frostbite until someone else points it out because the frozen tissues are numb. If you detect symptoms of frostbite, seek medical care.

About the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department

The nationally-accredited Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department has served the Lawrence and Douglas County community for more than 120 years. Its mission is to advance policies, practices and programs that promote health for all, prevent disease and protect the environment.

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