

Hypothermia

What is hypothermia?

Hypothermia is a problem where your body's temperature becomes dangerously low. Many of your body's organs can be damaged by hypothermia.

How does it occur?

Your body temperature may gradually drop from increased exposure to cold or immediately from falling into cold water.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of hypothermia occur gradually and progress as follows:

- ▶ you feel cold and begin to shiver
- ▶ you have difficulty thinking and become mentally confused
- ▶ you lose the ability to shiver
- ▶ your heart starts beating irregularly
- ▶ you fall into a coma.

If not treated hypothermia can result in death.

How is it diagnosed?

Your body temperature is checked and will usually be less than 96 degrees Fahrenheit. The health care provider will check for shivering, confusion, or other symptoms of hypothermia.

How is it treated?

A person with hypothermia needs immediate attention. First try to get medical help. If the person's clothes are wet, it is important that they are removed and that the person is placed in warm clothing, blankets, or a sleeping bag. A dry hat should be put on the person's head because the head is a primary

source of heat loss. Let the person warm up gradually in a warm room.

Bring the person to a hospital to receive treatment. The treatment at the hospital depends on how low the person's temperature has become. Health care providers may use warm oxygen, warm intravenous fluids, or a warming blanket. Specific treatment for injured organs is also given.

How long will the effects of hypothermia last?

How long the effects of hypothermia last depends upon how badly the individual organs were damaged. In many cases people are fine right after treatment. In other cases, hypothermia can result in death.

How do I prevent hypothermia?

Hypothermia is best prevented by being prepared and dressing appropriately. It is important to wear several layers of clothes over one another rather than wearing a single, thick layer. The best layers are those that provide good insulation and keep moisture away from the skin. Materials that do this include polypropylene, polyesters, and wool. It is important to wear an outer garment that is waterproof but will also "breathe." Wearing a hat is also important.

Hypothermia can occur when people least expect it. Follow these safety guidelines:

- ▶ Carry proper clothing in a backpack so you are prepared for bad weather.
- ▶ Do not begin an outing too late in the day when weather could suddenly change.
- ▶ Take off clothing when it gets wet and put on warm, dry clothes.
- ▶ Drink plenty of nonalcoholic fluids. People who get hypothermia are often dehydrated.