

The recent cold snap has been a challenge for all of us, but especially for older adults. It limits their ability to maintain a social lifestyle and even prevents them from making trips to the grocery store for food. The wind has been strong enough to push individuals around and managing a car door in the process can be nearly impossible for older senior citizens.

As if the cold, flu, or respiratory issues aren't enough to be concerned about, being really cold can make a person very sick. Older adults are especially vulnerable to this because they can lose body heat fast – faster than when they were younger.

As we age, our body changes can make it more difficult to sense how cold we are getting. Catching a chill becomes more literal as we age. Older adults who get a big chill can be in danger before they even realize what is happening. Medically speaking, this "big chill" is called hypothermia.

According to Mayo Clinic, hypothermia is defined as "a medical emergency that occurs when your body loses heat faster than it can produce heat – resulting in a dangerously low body temperature." Our normal body temperature across all ages is around 98.6°F (or 37°C.). Hypothermia results when the body temperature falls below 95°F (35°C.). For an older adult, a body temperature of 95°F or lower can cause many health problems, such as heart attack, kidney problems, liver damage, or worse.

Going out in our cold winter Kansas weather, or even being in a very cold house, can lead to hypothermia. It is important for older people to stay away from cold places and pay attention to how cold it is where they are. By avoiding exposure to cold temperatures, they can greatly reduce their risk of hypothermia.

Many times, we feel compelled to lower the thermostat to help save on our winter heating bill. For an older adult, this can lead to illness more so than younger people. Living in a cold house, apartment or other residential building can cause hypothermia because of the rapid loss of heat that can occur for older people. If you know someone living in a group home, pay attention to the inside temperature when you go to visit and to whether that person is dressed warmly enough.

When a person is sick, they may have unusual problems with staying warm. Keeping the thermostat at a warm and comfortable level is important. Even if they keep the thermostat set between 60°F and 65°F, their home or apartment may not be warm enough to keep them safe.

This is of special concern for those older adults who live alone. They may not realize how cold it is and they have no one else in the house to help them recognize the chill in the air. They also have no one to look for the signs of hypothermia which include:

- Shivering
- Slurred speech or mumbling
- Slow, shallow breathing

- Weak pulse
- Clumsiness or lack of coordination
- Drowsiness or very low energy
- Confusion or memory loss
- Loss of consciousness

If you are a senior adult, the National Institute on Aging offers the following tips to make sure you remain comfortably safe and warm in your home:

- 1) Set your heat to at least 68-70°F. To save on heating bills, close off rooms you are not using. Close the vents and shut the doors in these rooms, and keep the basement door closed. Place a rolled towel in front of all doors to keep out drafts.
- 2) Make sure your house isn't losing heat through windows. Keep your blinds and curtains closed. If you have gaps around the windows, try using weather stripping or caulk to keep the cold air out.
- 3) Dress warmly on cold days even if you are staying in the house. Throw a blanket over your legs. Wear socks and slippers, as well.
- 4) When you go to sleep, wear long underwear under your pajamas, and use extra covers. Wear a cap or hat to help keep heat in your body.
- 5) Make sure you eat enough food to keep up your weight. If you don't eat well, you might have less fat under your skin. Body fat helps you to stay warm.
- 6) Drink alcohol moderately, if at all. Alcoholic drinks can make you lose body heat.
- 7) Ask family or friends to check on you during cold weather. If a power outage leaves you without heat, try to stay with a relative or friend.

If you or someone you know are showing indications of hypothermia, call 9-1-1 immediately. If you are calling for someone else, there are a few things you can do before help arrives:

- Try to move the person to a warmer place. Be gentle as jarring movements can trigger dangerous irregular heartbeats.
- Wrap the person in a warm blanket, towels, or coats – whatever is handy. Even your own body heat can help. Lie close, but be gentle.
- Give the person something warm to drink, but avoid drinks with alcohol or caffeine, such as regular coffee.
- Do not rub the person's legs or arms.
- Do not try to warm the person in a bath.
- Do not use a heating pad.

Older adults are at a greater risk for hypothermia in cold weather because of their body's inability to regulate temperature and sense cold temperatures as easily as younger people. Some older adults may not be able to communicate when they are cold or move to a warm location if they do feel cold.

Check in on those you care about who are older and help keep them safe and warm this winter. Until next time, keep living resourcefully.