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THE NORTH COUNTRY HEALTH EFFECT

A health & safety guide brought to you by the Clinton County Health Department.

Staying safe in extreme cold



Winter in the North Country can be beautiful or it can run the gamut of all winter precipitation - rain, snow, sleet, hail, ice, you name it! Just about the only thing predictable about our winters are cold temperatures. When it's cold, our body loses heat faster than it can make it, leading to serious health problems, like hypothermia and frostbite. When the temperature dips below 32°F, try to stay inside as much as possible. If you have to go outside, protect yourself by bundling up and knowing the signs and symptoms of hypothermia and frostbite.

Hypothermia

Hypothermia happens when your **body temperature gets abnormally low**. It usually has to be extremely cold for this to happen, but if you are wet (like from rain, sweat or cold water) it can happen at warmer temperatures too. If your body temperature is too low it affects the brain, **making it hard to think clearly or move well**. This makes hypothermia very dangerous, because you may not know that it's happening and won't be able to do anything about it.

Frostbite

Frostbite happens when your **skin is exposed to extreme cold** for too long. It makes you lose feeling or color in the affected areas. Your nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers or toes are most often affected. **Often times you are unaware of frostbite because frozen tissue is numb**. It happens in three stages—mild, superficial and deep (see side panel).

Prevent frostbite by covering the body parts that are most often affected in warm dry clothing when you go outside in cold temperatures. **If you have to go outside be sure to wear:** a hat; a scarf or knit mask that covers your face and mouth; water-resistant coat and boots; mittens or gloves; and several layers of loose-fitting clothing.

If someone is experiencing the signs or symptoms of hypothermia or frostbite, or if their body temperature is below 95°F, **seek medical attention** as soon as possible. Get them into a warm room or shelter. Take off any wet clothing. Warm them under dry layers of blankets and clothing. Place areas affected by frostbite in warm-to-touch water.

Be careful when treating frostbite. Since skin may be numb, victims of frostbite can do more harm to damaged tissues (like fingers, toes, ears, etc.).

Signs & symptoms

Hypothermia

- shivering
- exhaustion
- confusion
- fumbling hands
- memory loss
- slurred speech
- drowsiness

Frostbite

Stage 1 (mild)

- redness
- pain or tingling
- numbness

Stage 2 (superficial)

- white or pale skin
- burning or stinging
- swelling
- blisters

Stage 3 (deep)

- white or bluish gray skin
- numbness
- loss of sensation
- loss of joint or muscle function
- large blisters
- black or hardening tissue

Anyone can fall on a slippery surface and winter has plenty of hazards. These tips can help you keep your balance and move with confidence across ice, snow or water covered surfaces.

Slip & fall prevention

- Plan your trips in advance.
- Dress warm (see page 4).
- Wear shoes with good traction.
- Slow down.
- Keep your driveway and sidewalk clear.
- Stay on cleared sidewalks or paths.
- Pay attention to the surfaces around you.
- Keep your hands free.
- Take short steps, like a penguin.
- Be careful getting out of your car.



Safe snow removal

Your body is already working hard just to stay warm, so try not to overdo it. Cold weather can put an extra strain on your heart. If you have heart disease or high blood pressure, follow your doctor's advice about shoveling snow or other outdoor activities. Be careful and take plenty of breaks.

When you are shoveling, push the snow instead of lifting it and lift lighter loads when possible. If the snow is heavy or wet, shovel or snow blow smaller loads a few different times during the storm.

Always follow the manufacturer's instructions when snow blowing. If your snow blower does clog, turn it OFF! Release the clutch and wait for the blades to stop. Use a stick or broom handle to clear the impacted snow. **Never put your hand down the chute or around the blades.**





Dress for cold weather

Inner layer: Be sure to wear fabrics that hold in your body heat without absorbing moisture. Wool, silk, or polypropylene will hold in more body heat than cotton.

Middle layer: An insulating layer will help you stay warm by keeping air close to your body. Natural fibers, like wool or goose down, or a classic fleece work best.

Outer layer: The outermost layer helps protect you from wind, rain, and snow. It should be tightly woven, water and wind resistant.

For more health & safety tips, visit www.clintonhealth.org/nchealtheffect or scan the QR code.



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Information in this guide was adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, www.cdc.gov); the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH, www.health.ny.gov); and the American Red Cross (www.redcross.org).