

Extreme Cold Weather

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

Extreme Cold

Extreme cold events occur when winter temperatures drop significantly below average for that time of the year. Exposure to cold temperatures, whether indoors or outside, can cause other serious or life-threatening health problems. To keep yourself and your family safe, you should know how to prevent cold-related health problems and what to do if a cold-weather health emergency arises.

Are You at Risk?

During extreme cold weather, everyone is at risk, but some groups are more vulnerable than others. They include:

- Infants (under 1 year)
- People 65 years of age or older
- Homeless People
- Outdoor workers
- Sport enthusiasts (skiers, ice skaters)
- People living in homes that are poorly insulated or without heat
- People living in homes without power (usually due to other weather-related events such as a winter storm).

Health Risks of Extreme Cold

Know When to Get Help

Hypothermia: Symptoms/signs include: shivering, exhaustion, confusion, fumbling/uncoordinated movements, memory loss, slurred speech, drowsiness.

Frostbite: Symptoms/signs include white/grayish skin area, skin that feels unusually firm or waxy, or numbness.

Consult a healthcare provider or call Telehealth Ontario (1-866-797-0000 or TTY at 1-877-797-0007) if you experience any of the above symptoms.

Things You Can Do to Protect Yourself

Prepare for extreme cold events every winter—it's always a possibility in Ontario. There are numerous steps you can take both before and during this type of event:

- Stay in heated buildings as much as possible (your home, friend or family's place, public buildings such as malls, libraries, etc)
- Drink warm fluids but avoid caffeinated or alcoholised beverages, as they cause your body to lose heat more rapidly.
- Dress appropriately when going outside (multiple layers of loose fitting clothes, toques, mittens, etc) and cover up all exposed skin since, in extreme cold, frostbite can occur within minutes.
- Avoid strenuous exercise while out in the cold as much as possible.
- Know the weather forecast, and avoid travelling when extreme weather is predicted.

Prepare Your Home and Car for Winter

At Home:

- Have alternate means of heating with sufficient fuel, such as a wood or propane furnace, or a kerosene heater. Ensure alternative source of heat is approved for indoor use
- Generator with several days' worth of fuel (Caution: generators produce toxic gases such as carbon monoxide. These should only be used outdoors where fumes may be vented safely.)
- Electric space heaters with automatic shut-off and non-glowing elements (to reduce the risk of fire)
- Blankets

In the Car:

- Travel with a mobile phone
- Blankets and other warm clothing (gloves, toques, jacket) - never rely on a car for heat since it may break down
- First aid kit
- Signalling device, such as road flares
- Booster cables
- Toolkit
- Bag of sand (to pour on ice or snow for added traction)
- Tow rope
- Collapsible shovel
- Flash light and spare batteries
- Candles and matches
- Brightly coloured clothes
- Container of water and high energy bars
- Windshield scraper

Useful Links:

Canadian Red Cross

<http://www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=001902&tid=021>

Canada Safety Council

<http://www.safety-council.org/info/OSH/coldfact.htm>

US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/guide.asp>

Federal Emergency Management Agency

<http://www.fema.gov/areyouready/winter.shtm>

City of Toronto Cold weather alerts

<http://www.toronto.ca/coldweatheralert/index.htm>

Ontario Public Health Unit Websites:

Algoma Health Unit

<http://www.ahu.on.ca/content/healthinfo/document.asp?DocumentID=1106>

Chatham Kent Public Health Services

<http://www.chatham-kent.ca/community+services/Public+Health/environmental+health/health+and+weather/Extreme+Temperatures.htm>

http://www.chatham-kent.ca/cityBundle_services/downloadsService/downloadfiles/03084eda-da8d-4952-ac20-d4227e28e9cd_extreme_temp.pdf

Halton Region Health Department

http://www.halton.ca/health/services/air_quality/cold_alert.htm

http://www.halton.ca/health/Resources/healthy_environment/pdf/extreme_cold_fact_sheet.pdf

County of Lambton Community Health Services
Department

<http://www.lambtonhealth.on.ca/family/sever%20weather%20fact%20sheet%20%20cold%20weather%20final.pdf>

Middlesex-London Health Unit

<http://www.healthunit.com/article.aspx?ID=11943>

City of Ottawa - Health

http://ottawa.ca/residents/safety/extreme_weather/index_en.html

Peel Regional Health Unit

<http://www.peelregion.ca/health/cold/wind-chill.htm>

<http://www.peelregion.ca/health/cold/extreme-cold/public.htm>

Peterborough County-City Health Unit

<http://pcchu.peterborough.on.ca/jackfrost.htm>

Sudbury and District Health Unit

<http://www.sdhu.com/content/news/details.asp?n=389&lang=0>

Toronto Public Health

http://www.toronto.ca/ems/safety_tips/cold.htm

<http://www.toronto.ca/coldweatheralert/faq.htm>

Regional Municipality of Waterloo, Community Health
Department

<http://chd.region.waterloo.on.ca/web/health.nsf/0/124e59e45812a0f485256deb005e5e00?OpenDocument>

York Region Health Services Department

<http://www.york.ca/Publications/News/2006/January+16,+2006+Cold+Weather+emergency.htm>