

Winter Weather Health Tips

Though most of California experiences relatively mild winters, there always exists the potential for freezing weather.

The elderly and medically fragile are particularly susceptible to the cold. Persons with poor circulation, or who take medications that can interfere with the body's ability to regulate temperature, are at risk for hypothermia.

Hypothermia is defined, by the National Institute on Aging, as when the body temperature drops below 96 degrees. Symptoms include slurred speech, sluggishness, confusion, dizziness, shallow breathing, unusual behavior, and a slow, irregular heartbeat.

If a person is suffering from hypothermia do not give the individual caffeine, or alcohol, both of which can worsen the condition. Until medical help is available, re-warm the person starting at the core of the body. Warming arms and legs first can increase circulation of cool blood to the heart, which can lead to heart failure. Use a blanket to gradually warm the individual.

Dehydration

As people age, the mechanism that triggers their thirst becomes less sensitive. At the same time, a lower percentage of body weight is made up of water, leading to dehydration. It is recommended that individuals drink 6 to 8 glasses of liquid a day, especially in dry, cold weather.

Carbon monoxide safety

It is critical to ensure that all fuel burning devices are properly ventilated and receive regular inspections. Fireplaces need to be kept free of debris, and chimneys and flues should be maintained. Ovens, gas or charcoal barbecue grills should never be used for heating.

Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning are headache, dizziness, chest pain, nausea and vomiting. In severe cases, people can become increasingly irritable, agitated and confused, eventually becoming lethargic and lapsing into unconsciousness. If you suspect carbon monoxide poisoning, call 911 and get the victim to fresh air immediately.

It is advisable to have a carbon monoxide detector and check the batteries regularly.

If you lose heat

Measures should be taken to trap existing warm air. If it appears the loss of heat will be of significant duration, hang blankets over windows and doorways and move to a well insulated room. If available, use a properly operating fireplace for heat.

Be prepared

Have additional battery operated lighting, phones, and radios available in the event of an extended power loss. Have a plan for how to best deal with power and heat disruptions. Common sense and preparation will go a long way to ensure patients remain comfortable and safe during winter weather emergencies.