

State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations



**Department of Human Services
Division of Elderly Affairs**

RHODE ISLAND SENIOR BEAT

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**HYPOTHERMIA POSES A SIGNIFICANT HEALTH RISK FOR SENIORS
AND PERSONS WITH CHRONIC HEALTH CARE CONDITIONS**

CRANSTON --- The unique nature of New England weather has provided an endless supply of material for comedians and humorists. The one thing that you can count on is unpredictability. January may include temperatures of 55 degrees one day and 15 degrees the next day. Given the recent weather, it's obvious that the January thaw has morphed into the frozen tundra.

The current extreme cold is more than just uncomfortable, it can be dangerous for seniors and persons with chronic health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, respiratory illnesses, or for persons with compromised immune systems. Hypothermia can be a life-threatening consequence of prolonged periods of arctic weather.

Normal body temperature is 98.6 F. Hypothermia occurs when a person's body temperature goes below 95 F. Hypothermia sets in when the body loses heat faster than it can produce heat.

When hypothermia takes over, the body temperature drops and vital organs, such as the heart or nervous system, do not work efficiently. If not treated quickly, hypothermia can lead to heart failure, respiratory failure, and can affect the functions of other organs as well. These consequences are very serious and can be fatal. While shivering is the body's automatic defense against the cold, constant, uncontrollable shivering is symptomatic of hypothermia.

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Other symptoms of hypothermia may include, but are not limited to:

- Clumsiness or lack of coordination;
- Stumbling or unsteady gait;
- Slurred speech or mumbling;
- Confusion or difficulty thinking;
- Apathy or apparent lack of concern of knowledge for one's condition;
- Drowsiness or very low energy;
- Loss of consciousness;
- Weak pulse; and/or
- Shallow breathing.

When someone shows these symptoms, call for medical help immediately.

While waiting for medical help to arrive, first aid can be administered. Take care not to make any sudden jarring or vigorous movements as those actions can lead to cardiac arrest. First aid for hypothermia victims includes getting the person out of the cold or shielding the person from the cold and wind, and/or removing wet clothes (if applicable), and covering the person with blankets, (including the head with only the face exposed).

Pay close attention to the victim's breathing rate. If it appears to be shallow or breathing stops, administer CPR, if you have been trained to administer this life-saving action. The American Red Cross offers information and training on the latest CPR techniques. Contact the state chapter of the American Red Cross at 831-7700, or go to www.riredcross.org. for more information.

On-site first aid for hypothermia victims also includes insulating the person's body from the cold ground; providing warm, non-alcoholic beverages; and applying warm, dry compresses to the neck, and chest wall, or groin.

Do not apply compresses to the victim's arms or legs. This can force blood back to the heart, lungs or brain, and can actually cause the body temperature to drop. Do not apply direct heat because it can cause damage to the skin or trigger cardiac arrest.

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It's also a good idea to minimize the risks of becoming hypothermic by remembering these simple, commonsense tips:

- Have a winter emergency kit that includes flash lights, a portable radio with extra batteries, bottled water, a first aid kit, non-perishable food and a manual can opener.
- Do not go outside unless it is necessary. If you do have to go out, dress in layers of loose, lighter weight clothing instead of one heavy jacket.
- Wear hats, mittens, and boots. Put on waterproof boots if it's raining or snowing.
- Cover your mouth with a scarf to protect your lungs.
- If your heating system fails, call your heating supplier immediately to repair your equipment as soon as possible. In the meantime, seal off unused rooms and minimize drafts by stuffing towels under the door. Place blankets over the windows at night to cut down heat loss, if necessary.
- The Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency also reminds you to check on elder neighbors, friends, and persons with disabilities. For additional information, call the RIEMA at 946-9996; or go to www.riema.ri.gov.

And remember, spring is just 55 days away.

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The Rhode Island Department of Human Services, Division of Elderly Affairs (DEA) is responsible for the development and implementation of a comprehensive system of programs and services for Rhode Islanders ages 60 and older and for adults with disabilities. Questions or requests for additional information on the issues of growing older, or for issues concerning adults with disabilities in Rhode Island should be directed to: Larry Grimaldi, Rhode Island Senior Beat, Rhode Island Department of Human Services, Division of Elderly Affairs, 74 West Road, Cranston, RI 02920 or faxed to 462-0545. The e-mail address is lgrimaldi@dea.ri.gov.