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**RHODE ISLAND SENIOR BEAT**

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**RELEASE:** Friday, February 4, 2011

# IT'S A "TURN BACK THE CLOCK" WINTER

**CRANSTON ---** Even though we are just slightly past the halfway point in the winter of 2011, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it the "turn back the clock" winter. If you remember photos of snowstorms taken in the 1920s and 1930, it's easy to visualize huge hills of snow clogging streets in Providence and around the state. And while winter storms bring joy to skiers, unscheduled vacation days for school children and snowmen popping up all over the neighborhood, winter also poses many risks to seniors and adults with disabilities. One of the most dangerous of these risks is hypothermia. Hypothermia carries serious consequences for persons with weak or compromised immune systems, and to those with chronic conditions such as heart disease or respiratory problems.

Normal body temperature is 98.6 F. Hypothermia occurs when a person's body temperature goes below 95 F. Hypothermia can strike when a person experiences prolonged exposure to very cold weather, or is immersed in a cold body of water. 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. The Mayo Clinic lists these additional symptoms:

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- Clumsiness or lack or coordination
- Stumbling
- Slurred speech or mumbling
- Confusion or difficulty thinking
- Apathy or apparent lack of concern for one's condition
- Drowsiness or very low energy
- Loss of consciousness
- Weak pulse
- 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, removing wet clothes 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 has unveiled a new CPR technique that involves performing a series of chest pumps. 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, 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 brains 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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The Boston regional office of the Administration on Aging offers these hints to help minimize the danger of hypothermia and other risks posed by extremely cold weather:

- 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 looser, lighter weight clothing instead of one heavy jacket.
- Wear hats, mittens, and boots. Put on waterproof boots if you have them.
- Cover your mouth with a scarf to protect your lungs.
- If your heating system fails, 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.

The Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency also reminds you to check on elder neighbors and friends and those with disabilities. For additional information, call the RIEMA at 946-9996; or go to www.riema.ri.gov.

Remember, spring is just 44 days away and many baseball spring training camps open in just 10 days!

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The Department of Elderly Affairs was established as a cabinet-level position in 1977 under Rhode Island General Law 42-66-1. 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. DEA is also the state's single planning and service Area Agency on Aging under the provisions of the Older Americans Act of 1965.