**COLD WEATHER? Tips for the elderly**

This note applies to the elderly in general, but for people living with dementia this advice is particularly relevant.

Most people feel cold every now and then in the winter months especially in South Africa's more southern and high altitude areas such as Cape Town Johannesburg. Being cold can make you very sick.

Older people can lose body heat faster than they did when they were young, even though they may not be aware of it. A big chill can become a serious problem before you know what is happening. The medical term for this problem is hypothermia.

**WHAT IS HYPOTHERMIA?**

It is what happens when your body temperature gets very low. For an older person a body temperature of 95F (35C) or lower can cause many health problems, such as a heart attack, kidney problems, liver damage or worse.

Being outside in the cold or in a very cold house can result in hypothermia. Try to stay away from cold places, and pay attention to the cold wherever you are.

You can lower the chances of getting hypothermia.

**KEEP WARM INSIDE**

Living in a cold house, flat, shack or other building can cause hypothermia. In fact, it can happen to someone in a residential care facility or similar places if the rooms are not kept warm enough. If someone you know is living in such places, pay attention to the inside temperature and to whether the person is dressed warmly enough.

People who are already sick may have special problems keeping warm. Do not let it get too cold inside and dress warmly. Even if your body temperature is between 60 and 65F (15-18C) your home may not be warm enough to keep you safe. This is a special problem if you live alone because there is no one else to feel the cold or notice if you are having symptoms of hypothermia.

**Here are some tips for keeping warm while you are inside.**

• Set your heat (if you have a setting) to at least 68 t0 70f or about 16 – 20 c. To save on costs, close off all rooms you are not using. Close all the windows and the basement if you have one. Place a rolled towel in front of all doors to keep out draughts (cold air).

• Make sure you are not losing heat through windows. Keep your blinds and curtains closed. If there any gaps, try using weather or a filling to keep the cold air out.

• Dress warmly on cold days even if you remain in the house. Use a blanket. Wear socks and slippers.

• When you go to bed, wear long underwear if you can under your sleepwear and put extra covers on the bed. Wear a cap or woollen hat.

• Make sure you eat enough to keep up your weight. If you eat too little you might have less fat under your skin. Body fat helps you to keep warm.

• Drink alcohol moderately or not at all. Alcohol can make you lose body heat.

• Ask friends or family to check on you in cold weather. Should you rely on electrical heating, if there is a long outage try to stay with a relative or friend.

Be aware that heaters can cause fire hazards and may cause carbon monoxide poisoning. Reduce hazards as far as possible for example: Is the cord frayed? Is the heater dented or cracked? If you use gas check for any leaks/loose connections.

**BUNDLING UP**

A heavy wind can quickly lower your body temperature. Check the weather forecast for windy and cold days. On such days, try to stay inside or in a warm place. If you have to go out, wear warm clothes, and do not stay out in the cold and wind for a long time.

Here are some other tips:

• Dress for the weather if you have to go out on chilly or damp days.

• Wear loose layers of clothing. The air between the layers helps to keep you warm.

• Put on a hat and scarf. You lose a lot of body heat when your head and neck are uncovered.

• Where a waterproof coat or jacket if it snows.

• Change your clothes as soon as possible if they get damp or wet.

**ILLNESS, MEDICINES AND COLD WEATHER**

Some illnesses may make it harder for your body to stay warm.

• Thyroid problems can make it hard to maintain a normal body temperature.

• Diabetes can keep blood from flowing normally to provide warmth.

Parkinson's disease and arthritis can make it hard to put on enough clothes. So use a blanket, or get out of the cold.

Memory loss can cause a person to go outside without the right clothing.

Talk to your doctor about your health and how to prevent hypothermia.

Taking some medicines and not being active can also affect body heat. These include medicines prescribed by your doctor and those you buy from a shop without a prescription such as cold and cough medicines. Ask a doctor if the medicines you take may affect body heat and what the unwanted effects may be.

Here are some cold weather related topics to talk to your doctor about:

• Ask your doctor about signs of hypothermia.

• Discuss any health problems and medicines that can make hypothermia a special problem for you. Your doctor can help you to prevent hypothermia.

• Ask about ways to stay active even when it's cold outside

**WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS OF HYPOTHERMIA?**

Sometimes it is hard to tell if someone is suffering from hypothermia. Look for clues. Is the house very cold? Is the person not dressed for the cold? Is the person speaking slower than normal and having trouble keeping is her or her balance?

Watch for the signs of hypothermia in yourself too. You might get confused if your body temperature drips too low. Talk to your family about the warning signs so they can look out for you.

Early signs:

• Cold feet and hands

• Puffy or swollen face

• Changes in complexion

• Shivering (but in some case a person with hypothermia does not shiver)

• Slower than normal speech and slurring

• Sleepiness

• Being angry or confused

Later signs of hypothermia:

• Moving slowly, trouble walking or being clumsy

• Stiff and jerky arm movements

• Slow heartbeat

• Slow, shallow breathing

• Blacking out or losing consciousness.

**HYPOTHERMIA AND THE EMERGENCY ROOM**

The only way to tell for sure that someone has hypothermia is to use a special thermometer that can read very low body temperatures. Hospitals may have them. In an emergency a doctor may warm the body by giving warm fluids using intravenous methods. Recovery depends on how long the person was exposed to the cold and his or her general health.

(adapted from the USA based National Institute on Ageing: https://www.nih/health/cold - weather safety-older-adults).