



## A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

### *Stay Warm in Winter*

*Hypothermia-Related Deaths — Wisconsin, 2014, and United States, 2003-2013*

Recorded: February 24, 2015; posted: February 26, 2015

*[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

[Dr. Gaynes] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly feature of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Dr. Robert Gaynes.

When frigid winter temperatures hit the U.S., the risk for unhealthy exposure to cold increases substantially.

Dr. Jonathan Meiman is a physician with Wisconsin's Division of Public Health. He's joining us today by phone to discuss the dangers of exposure to extremely cold temperatures. Welcome to the show, Jon.

[Dr. Meiman] Great. Thanks for having me. It's good to be here.

[Dr. Gaynes] Let's start, Jon, with what is hypothermia?

[Dr. Meiman] Hypothermia, simply defined, is an abnormally low body temperature. As many listeners might know, normal body temperature is around 98 degrees Fahrenheit. Hypothermia is when the internal, the core, body temperature drops below 95 degrees.

[Dr. Gaynes] Is any group of people more susceptible to hypothermia?

[Dr. Meiman] There are a few groups who are at the highest risk of developing hypothermia. One of the highest risk groups is the elderly. As we get older, our bodies lose the ability to generate heat as well as when we were younger. And many elderly people, especially those that live alone, may not have access to adequate heat. Another group of people that we're concerned about are people that spend large amounts of time outdoors, either for recreation or because they don't have adequate housing. And finally, I'd say the last group who is at high risk are people who use alcohol and certain drugs. Alcohol causes the body to lose heat more quickly and it may impair judgment and lead people to remain outdoors longer than is healthy. Other drugs, narcotics, for instance, if used improperly, may also impair thinking and lead people to remain outside longer than they should.

[Dr. Gaynes] Jon, what are the most common symptoms of hypothermia?

[Dr. Meiman] The most common symptoms are things that we've probably all experienced when we've gotten a little cold, which is shivering and cool hands and feet. However, as hypothermia worsens, people's thinking, generally, starts to worsen. They may become confused, they may start to slur their speech, and they may even have things like hallucinations. As hypothermia becomes very severe, people may lose

consciousness, the heart rate slows down, and they may have impaired breathing which can ultimately lead to death.

[Dr. Gaynes] Well, what should a person do if they are experiencing symptoms of hypothermia?

[Dr. Meiman] The first thing a person should do if they begin to develop symptoms is to get into a warm environment as quickly as possible. If they're wearing wet clothing, that really accelerates heat loss and so that clothing should be removed and replaced with dry, warmer clothing as quickly as possible. If people develop more severe symptoms of hypothermia—confusion, for example, or if their temperature, if they measure their temperature and it's 95 degrees or below—this is a medical emergency and people should contact 911 as soon as possible.

[Dr. Gaynes] How can we protect ourselves in extreme cold conditions?

[Dr. Meiman] In this case, I'd say the best protection from extreme cold is good preparation. So, if you know you're going to be outside in cold weather for a prolonged period of time, it's important to dress appropriately—wearing many layers of clothing. It's also important, if you're going to be outside, to stay hydrated—drink lots of fluids, maintain good nutrition, and also, importantly, avoiding alcohol or drugs that may impair your thinking and lead you to stay outside longer than is safe. For people who live in areas of the country that frequently get cold weather, it's important to be prepared in case you should have a loss of heat in your home or if you should become stranded in your car, to always have things on hand—warm blankets, for example—that can help get you through an emergency. And finally, for people with friends or family members who are elderly and may live alone, it's important that they have some way of checking in on them on a regular basis, because the sooner you can get medical care if you develop hypothermia, the better the outcome.

[Dr. Gaynes] Jon, where can listeners get more information about hypothermia?

[Dr. Meiman] Listeners can go to [cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov) and, in the search box, type “hypothermia.”

[Dr. Gaynes] Thanks, Jon. I've been talking today with CDC's Dr. Jonathan Meiman about the dangers of exposure to extremely cold temperatures.

Older people and the homeless are at highest risk for hypothermia. Substance and alcohol abuse can hinder the body's ability to fight off the cold. To help prevent hypothermia and save lives, avoid alcohol, dress appropriately, and stay indoors.

Until next time, be well. This is Dr. Robert Gaynes for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) or call 1-800-CDC-INFO.