



The AGS Foundation for
Health in Aging's

Winter Safety Tips for Older Adults

When the temperature drops, older adults run a high risk of health problems

related to the cold—including hypothermia (dangerously low body temperature), frostbite, falls in ice and snow, and injuries. So it's important that they, and those who care for them, take certain precautions this time of year.

Here's what you need to know to protect yourself, or older loved ones, from:

Hypothermia:

Because older adults have slower metabolisms, they tend to produce less body heat than younger people. Thanks to the way our bodies change as we age, it's also harder for older adults to tell when the temperature is too low. This can be dangerous because your body, when outside in the cold for too long, begins to lose heat very quickly. The result can be hypothermia, a deadly drop in body temperature. Here's what you should do:

- Stay indoors when it's very cold outside, especially if it's also very windy; and keep indoor temperatures at about 65 degrees
- If you have to go outside, don't stay out in the cold or the wind for very long
- Wear two or three thinner layers of loose-fitting clothing.
(They are warmer than a single layer of thick clothing.)

Always wear:

- a hat
- gloves or mittens (mittens are warmer)
- a coat and boots
- a scarf to cover your mouth and nose and protect your lungs from very cold air
- Stay dry; wet clothing chills your body quickly
- Go indoors if you start shivering— it's a warning sign that you're losing body heat.
- Know the warning signs of hypothermia: lots of shivering; cold skin that is pale or ashy; feeling very tired, confused and sleepy; feeling weak; problems walking; slowed breathing or heart rate.

Note: Don't rely on shivering alone as a warning sign, since older people tend to shiver less—and some, not at all—as their body temperature drops. Call 911 if you think you or someone else has hypothermia.

Frostbite:

Extreme cold can also cause frostbite—damage to the skin that can go all the way down to the bone. Frostbite usually affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers and toes. In very bad cases, it can result in loss of limbs. People with heart disease and other circulation problems are more likely to get frostbite. To protect against frostbite:

- Cover up all parts of your body when you go outside
- If your skin turns red or dark or starts hurting, go inside right away
- Know the telltale signs of frostbite: skin that's white or ashy (for people with darker skin) or grayish-yellow; skin that feels hard or waxy; numbness. If you think you or someone else has frostbite, call for medical help immediately. A person with frostbite may also have hypothermia, so check for those symptoms, too (see above).

Falls:

It's very easy to slip and fall in the winter. To lower the odds of a fall:

- Carefully shovel steps and walkways to your home or hire someone to shovel for you (see below)
- Do not walk on icy or snowy sidewalks; look for sidewalks that are dry and have been cleared.
- Wear boots with non-skid soles so you do not slip when you walk
- If you use a cane, replace the rubber tip before it is worn smooth. You might also buy an ice pick-like attachment that fits onto the end of the cane to help keep you from slipping when you walk with the cane. (You can find these at medical supply stores)

Injury while shoveling snow:

When it's cold outside, your heart works extra hard to keep you warm. Working hard by shoveling snow, for example, may put too much strain on your heart, especially if you have heart disease. Shoveling can also be dangerous if you have problems with balance, or “thin bones” (osteoporosis). You should:

- Ask your healthcare provider whether it is safe for you to shovel snow or do other hard work in the cold

Fires and carbon monoxide poisoning:

Burning wood, natural gas, kerosene and other fuels produces a gas that you cannot see or smell. It is a very deadly gas called carbon monoxide. Unless fireplaces, wood and gas stoves and gas appliances are properly vented, cleaned, and used, they can leak dangerous amounts of carbon monoxide. These and other appliances, such as kerosene and electric heaters, can also be fire hazards. You should:

- Have fireplace and wood stove chimneys and flues inspected yearly and cleaned when necessary. (Ask your local fire department to recommend an inspector or look in the telephone book under “chimney cleaning”)

- Put a smoke detector and battery-operated carbon monoxide detector in areas where you use fireplaces, wood stoves, or kerosene heaters
- Open a window—just a crack will do—when using a kerosene stove
- Make sure space heaters are at least 3 feet away from anything that might catch fire, such as curtains, bedding and furniture
- Keep a fire extinguisher that can be used for a variety of types of fires, including chemical fires, in areas where you use fireplaces, wood stoves and kerosene heaters
- Never try to heat your home using a gas stove, charcoal grill, or other stove not made for home heating

Accidents while driving:

Adults 65 and older are involved in more car accidents per mile driven than those in nearly all other age groups. Since winter driving can be very dangerous, you should:

- Winterize your car before the bad weather hits (have the antifreeze, tires and windshield wipers checked and changed if necessary)
- Check weather reports and check for winter weather advisories before beginning long car trips
- Do not drive on icy roads, overpasses or bridges if possible; look for another route
- If you must drive in snow or ice, use tire chains when possible
- Slow down when roads are covered with snow or ice
- Take a cell phone with you when driving in bad weather and let someone know where you're going and when you expect to arrive so they can call for help if you're late
- Stock your car with basic emergency supplies, such as: a first aid kit, blankets, extra warm clothes, a windshield scraper, rock salt, a bag of sand or cat litter (to pour on ice or snow in case your wheels get stuck in the ice or snow), shovel, booster cables, container of water and canned or dried foods and can opener, flashlight



Foundation for Health in Aging

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The Foundation for Health in Aging builds a bridge between the research and practice of geriatrics health care professionals and the public. The Foundation advocates on behalf of older adults and their special needs through public education, clinical research, and public policy.

The American Geriatrics Society is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of older adults. With a membership of over 6,000 health care professionals, the AGS has a long history of improving the health care of older adults.