



Department of Health
140 County Highway 33W
Suite 3
Cooperstown, NY 13326
Phone: (607) 547-6483
Fax: (607) 547-4385

Public Health Emergencies and Winter Weather

Snow and ice storms and freezing temperatures can turn a winter wonderland into a public health emergency that threatens people's health and safety. People with health problems and those with fragile immune systems are particularly at risk.

Sue Smith; Deputy Director of the Otsego County Department of Health strongly advises residents to begin today, before a winter storm strikes, to "winterize" their family emergency preparedness plans and learn how to avoid exposure to extreme cold conditions that can lead to hypothermia and frostbite.

At home, make certain that you have extra water and food and know how you will manage during a power outage. A family's winter emergency plan should address how to keep people warm and dry if a winter storm knocks out power and electricity.

Never use a generator indoors to produce electricity because your family can be poisoned by carbon monoxide fumes. When using a non-electric heater or wood stove to warm your house, you must have adequate ventilation to the outside to prevent a build-up of carbon monoxide.

Carbon monoxide is an invisible odorless, poisonous gas given off by generators and other alternative heating sources. Symptoms of exposure to carbon monoxide are similar to the flu but without a fever. At lower levels of exposure, a person may develop a headache, fatigue, nausea, vomiting, dizziness and shortness of breath. Exposure to very high levels of carbon monoxide can result in loss of consciousness and even death.

Exposure to the lower temperatures can also cause medical emergencies. Hypothermia is a life-threatening condition that causes the body's core temperature to drop dangerously low. Symptoms of hypothermia include shivering, confusion, memory loss, drowsiness, exhaustion and slurred speech. Infants with hypothermia may have little energy and bright red, cold skin.

Hypothermia can occur unexpectedly even in rooms in which temperatures are set at 60 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit. People who are 65 and older should set their home thermostat no lower than 65 F. Those who are 75 and older should maintain home temperatures of 70 degrees F.

Frostbite is another serious cold weather condition, and is especially dangerous because it happens with little warning. “Numbness can occur so quickly that a person may not know it, and may remain outside, which increases the risk of permanent damage to the skin. Older people and those with diabetes are especially vulnerable to frostbite because of poor circulation,” Sue Smith said.

To prevent hypothermia and frostbite, dress warmly and wear several layers of clothes to trap body heat. Go indoors when you begin to feel cold. Wear outer clothing that is tightly woven to reduce body-heat loss caused by wind.

Cold weather also puts an extra burden on the heart. “If you have cardiac problems or high blood pressure, check with your doctor before shoveling or performing any strenuous exercise outside. Healthy adults, too, should dress warmly when working outside. You should go indoors if you begin to feel cold, and remember that the body is working overtime to keep warm,” Sue Smith said.

For more information on staying healthy and safe during severe winter weather, visit on-line at www.nyhealth.gov or call:

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