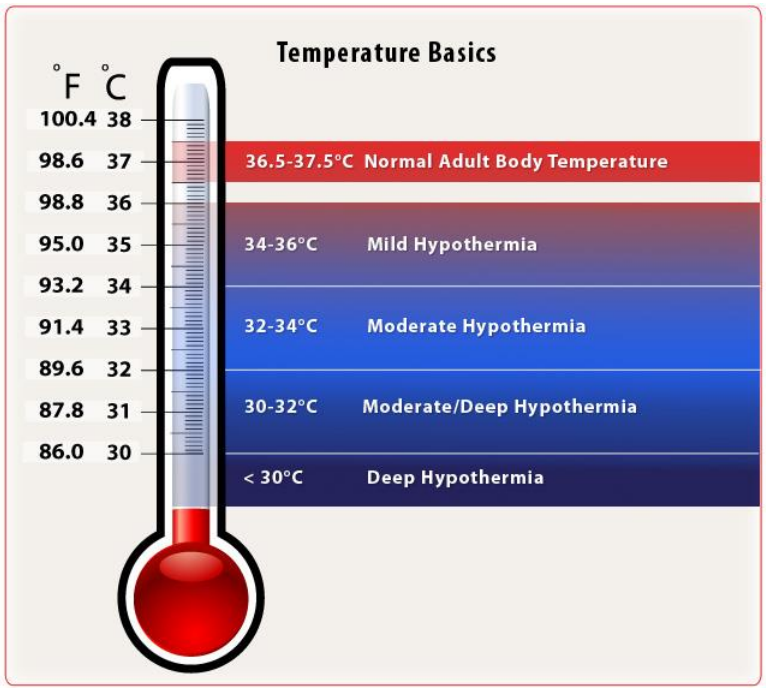
Health Facts for the Winter Months

Hypothermia



Hypothermia is a dangerous drop in body temperature below 35C (95F). Normal body temperature is around 37C (98.6F).

Hypothermia can be serious if not treated quickly. You should call 999 and give first aid if you notice signs of hypothermia.

Early signs of hypothermia include:

- shivering
- cold and pale skin
- slurred speech
- fast breathing
- tiredness
- confusion

These are symptoms of mild hypothermia, where someone's body temperature is between 32C and 35C.

If their temperature drops to 32C or lower, they'll usually stop shivering completely and may pass out.

This is a sign that their condition is getting worse and emergency medical help is needed.

Treating hypothermia

You should call 999 and then give first aid if you think someone's got hypothermia.

First aid for hypothermia

You need to warm the person up.

Follow these five steps:

1. Move them indoors.
2. Remove any wet clothing and dry them.
3. Wrap them in blankets.
4. Give them a warm non-alcoholic drink, but only if they can swallow normally.
5. Give energy food that contains sugar, such as a chocolate bar, but only if they can swallow normally.

If the person can't be moved indoors, find something for them to rest on to protect them from the cold ground, like a towel or a blanket.

If they don't appear to be breathing – and you know how to do it – give them CPR, but you must continue this until professional help arrives in the form of the ambulance service or a medical team.

Things to avoid

Some things can make hypothermia worse:

- Don't put the person into a hot bath.
- Don't massage their limbs.
- Don't use heating lamps.
- Don't give them alcohol to drink.

These actions can cause the heart to suddenly stop beating (cardiac arrest).

Who's at risk?

- older people who are inactive and don't eat well
- heavy alcohol and drug users – their bodies lose heat faster

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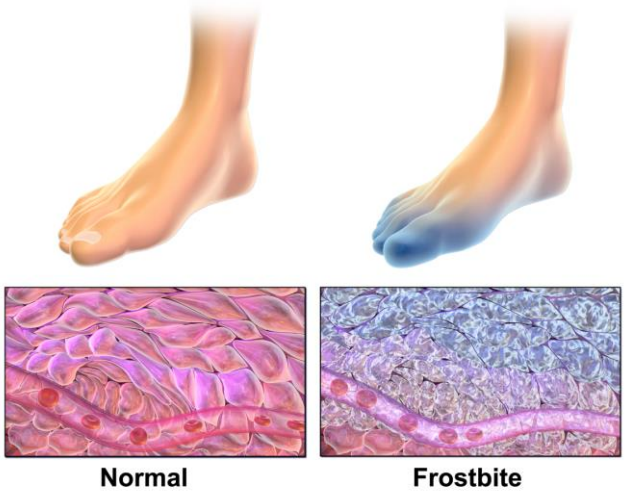


Frostbite

Frostbite is damage to skin and tissue caused by exposure to freezing temperatures – typically any temperature below -0.55C (31F).

Frostbite can affect any part of your body, but the extremities, such as the hands, feet, ears, nose and lips, are most likely to be affected.

The symptoms of frostbite usually begin with the affected parts feeling cold and painful.

If exposure to the cold continues, you may feel pins and needles before the area becomes numb, as the tissues freeze. Also see: **peripheral neuropathy.**

Many cases of frostbite occur in people who have taken drugs or drunk alcohol. Taking drugs or being drunk can lead to risky behavior, not responding normally to cold, or falling asleep outside in cold weather

When to seek medical attention

If you think you or someone else may have frostbite, call your GP or NHS 111 for advice.

If the symptoms are more severe or there are signs of hypothermia, such as constant shivering or fast breathing (hyperventilation), go immediately to your nearest accident and emergency (A&E) department.

Treating frostbite

A person with frostbite should be taken to a warm environment as soon as possible. This is to limit the effects of the injury and because it's also likely they'll have hypothermia.

Don't put pressure on the affected area or encourage the person to take a hot bath or shower the frostbitten area should be warmed up by a healthcare professional.

It's important not to rewarm the affected area if there's a chance of it freezing again as this can lead to further tissue damage.

What causes frostbite?

The body responds to cold temperatures by narrowing the blood vessels. Blood flow to the extremities slows down so flow to the vital organs can be increased.

As the blood is redirected away from the extremities, these parts of the body get colder, and fluid in the tissue can freeze into ice crystals.

The ice crystals can cause severe cell and tissue damage in the affected area. The low blood flow also deprives the tissues of oxygen. If blood flow can't be restored, the tissue will eventually die.

At-risk groups

Certain groups of people are at greater risk of getting frostbite.

They include:

- homeless people
- Drug/Alcohol misuse
- the very young and very old, as their bodies are less able to regulate body temperature

- people with conditions that cause blood vessel damage or circulation problems, such as diabetes and Raynaud's phenomenon
- anyone taking medication that constricts the blood vessels, including beta-blockers – smoking can also constrict the blood vessels

Preventing frostbite

The combination of wind and cold temperatures (wind chill) can also cause a rapid drop in temperature. So It's important to know what the early symptoms of frostbite are, particularly the tingling sensation of frostnip.

Wear appropriate clothing that protects your extremities, such as:

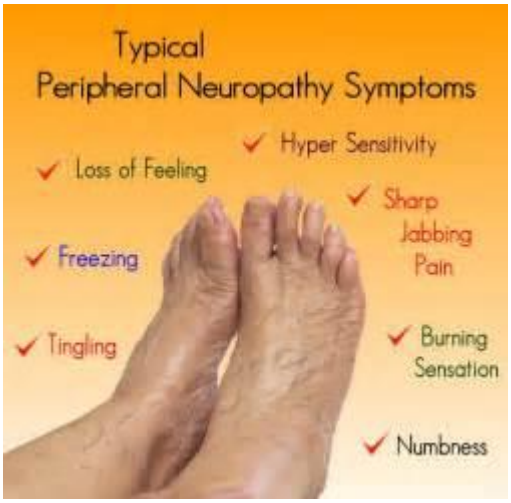
- **well-insulated boots and a thick pair of well-fitting socks**
- **mittens** – they provide better protection against very cold weather than gloves
- **a warm, weatherproof hat that covers your ears** – it's important to protect your head from the cold
- **multiple thin layers of warm, loose-fitting clothing** – these act as insulation

You should also try to keep dry and remove any wet clothing as soon as you can.

If you're travelling by foot, always let others know where you're going and what time you'll be back. Take a fully charged mobile phone with you so you can call for help if you have an accident, such as a fall.

Be careful when drinking alcohol during very cold weather. Drinking too much increases your risk of falling asleep in the cold, a common cause of frostbite. Alcohol also causes you to lose heat at a faster rate.

Smoking also makes you more vulnerable to the effects of the cold as nicotine can narrow.



Peripheral Neuropathy

Peripheral Neuropathy develops when nerves in the body's extremities – such as the hands, feet and arms – are damaged. The symptoms depend on which nerves are affected.

In the UK, it's estimated that almost 1 in 10 people aged 55 or over are affected by some degree of peripheral neuropathy.

Symptoms of peripheral neuropathy

The main symptoms of peripheral neuropathy can include:

- numbness and tingling in the feet or hands
- burning, stabbing or shooting pain in affected areas
- loss of balance and co-ordination
- muscle weakness, especially in the feet

These symptoms are usually constant, but may come and go.

When to see your GP

It's important to see your GP if you experience the early symptoms of peripheral neuropathy, such as:

- pain, tingling or loss of sensation in the feet
- loss of balance or weakness
- a cut or ulcer on your foot that isn't getting better

It's also recommended that people at highest risk of peripheral neuropathy, such as people with diabetes, have regular check-ups.

Generally, the sooner peripheral neuropathy is diagnosed, the better the chance of limiting the damage and preventing further complications.

Causes of peripheral neuropathy

In the UK, diabetes (both type 1 and type 2) is the most common cause of peripheral neuropathy.

Over time, the high blood sugar levels associated with diabetes can damage the nerves. This type of nerve damage is known as diabetic polyneuropathy.

Peripheral neuropathy can also have a wide range of other causes. For example, it can be caused by:

- physical injury to the nerves
- a viral infection such as shingles
- a side effect of certain medications or drinking too much alcohol

People who are known to be at an increased risk of peripheral neuropathy may have regular check-ups so their nerve function can be assessed.

Treating peripheral neuropathy

Treatment for peripheral neuropathy depends on the symptoms and underlying cause.

Only some of the underlying causes of neuropathy can be treated. For example, if you have diabetes it may help to gain better control of your blood sugar level, stop smoking and cut down on alcohol.

Nerve pain may be treated with prescribed medications called neuropathic pain agents, as standard painkillers are often ineffective.

If you have other symptoms associated with peripheral neuropathy, these may need to be treated individually. For example, treatment for muscle weakness may involve physiotherapy and the use of walking aids.

Complications of peripheral neuropathy

The outlook for peripheral neuropathy varies, depending on the underlying cause and which nerves have been damaged.

Some cases may improve with time if the underlying cause is treated, whereas in some people the damage may be permanent or may get gradually worse with time.

If the underlying cause of peripheral neuropathy isn't treated, you may be at risk of developing potentially serious complications, such as a foot ulcer that becomes infected..

For further information regarding the impact of drug/alcohol misuse during the winter months please contact steph.jones@addaction.org.uk or go to our addaction website www.addaction.org.uk