

Bundle up to stay warm and healthy this winter season

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As the winter season approaches and outside temperatures start to drop, it's no coincidence that more people seem to have the sniffles and

sneezes.

Veronica Sikka, M.D., Ph.D., assistant professor of [emergency medicine](#), VCU School of Medicine, talks about why people tend to get sick when [extreme weather](#) changes occur, what some [cold-weather](#) illnesses are, and most importantly, what people can do to stay healthy.

You often hear people complain of not feeling well because of the cold weather. Is that true—can people get sick from the cold?

Yes, that's why it's important to determine whether someone really has a cold or if something more serious is happening. The problem with the [common cold](#) is that it can lead to bigger issues like sinusitis, bronchitis or ear infections. Extreme changes in the climate cause our immune systems to break down, which makes us more susceptible to airborne pathogens.

What are the common cold-season ailments and the signs and symptoms?

- Common cold – runny nose, stuffy head, fatigue, sore throat and watery eyes.
- Frostnip – surface of skin turns red and there is a tingling/burning sensation. Frostnip can be the early stages of frostbite.
- Superficial frostbite - starting to lose sensation, may have some blistering in 24-36 hours as you're trying to warm the skin.
- Frostbite – skin appears white and waxy, contains blisters, loss of feeling.

Are there certain populations more prone to cold-weather illness?

Yes, the elderly and the young both have low immunity, as well as the extremely sick, like cancer patients. Those particular populations need to take extra precautions, because it is harder on them to fight infections.

If someone does experience signs and symptoms, at what point should they call the doctor or visit the emergency department?

If signs and symptoms do not seem to improve with basic home care like over-the-counter medications, drinking a lot of fluids and getting rest, consider seeing the doctor. Certainly call the doctor if you're running a fever, dehydrated, or if you can't sleep because you're coughing so hard. Also, if you start showing signs of frostbite, like loss of feeling and blisters, call the doctor or go to the [emergency department](#). The immune-compromised should contact a doctor at the onset of any symptoms.

What are preventive measures people can take to stay healthy?

- Practice good hygiene, especially hand hygiene (20 seconds to effectively wash away germs).
- Get plenty of exercise to keep up your metabolism, which in turn helps build your [immune system](#).
- Dress in layers and avoid going outside with wet hair, because the extreme temperature change from indoor to outdoor stresses the immune system.
- Wear a mask to avoid spreading germs, especially if you're visiting someone in the hospital.

However, it is best to avoid visiting the hospital if you're sick because

most patients' immune systems are compromised.

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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