

# Staying safe in the cold

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In extremely cold, snowy and windy conditions, your safest option is to stay indoors. But if you have to head outside, experts at Rush University Medical Center have advice for avoiding the most common cold-related injuries: frostbite, hypothermia and falls.

Ed Ward, vice chairperson of emergency medicine at Rush, suggests that people should put off any unnecessary trips outside until the weather moderates.

"Let it wait," Ward said. "Limit the time you spend outside." Ward also recommends that people wear multiple layers of loose, warm clothing and to pay special attention to keeping head, hands, ears and feet warm.

## **Frostbite**

Subzero temperatures can make exposed skin vulnerable to frostbite. Frostbite is damage caused by freezing of the skin and underlying tissues and "can occur within minutes, usually before people realize it," according to Paul Casey, MD, an emergency room physician and associate chief medical officer at Rush. "If you feel numbness or stinging, get out of the cold immediately," he adds.

If you suspect [frostbite](#), rewarm the affected area gently and gradually by immersing it in warm—never hot—water; and do not rub the affected area. If after several minutes the area remains numb or has a grayish-yellow color, call your primary physician, or visit an urgent care clinic or emergency room. In more severe cases, blisters or sores might develop.

## **Hypothermia**

"Our bodies protect us from extreme cold by sending blood to our core to keep our organs warm. But when [cold exposure](#) persists, our whole body cools to dangerous levels. When your core body temperature drops below 95 degrees, you have [hypothermia](#)," Casey explains.

Symptoms include persistent shivering, stiff muscles and impaired physical coordination, and symptoms also can involve confusion or

irritability. The very young and old, and those with cardiac conditions, need to be especially careful of not becoming hypothermic.

People who might be hypothermic need to get out of the cold quickly, remove any wet clothes and steadily get warm. Those experiencing [symptoms](#) of hypothermia never should be re-warmed using hot water bottles, electric blankets, or other thermal heat sources. If shivering persists after several minutes or a person seems confused, seek medical attention immediately.

Hypothermia is a contributing factor in more than 25,000 deaths in the U.S. annually.

## Falls

John Fernandez, MD, a hand and wrist surgeon at Rush, says cold, snowy or icy conditions invariably bring in patients who have slipped on the ice. If you have to be on the go, or if you're out walking a pet, Fernandez says, slow down and do not text or multitask while walking in these conditions. "If you slow down, walk with caution, and take time to be prepared, you will be less likely to get into a situation where you're going to slip and fall."

Fernandez says paying close attention to where you're walking and wearing the right footwear—boots or shoes with good traction—is a key factor in avoiding falls.

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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