
First Aid: Cold Exposure

The effects of cold

Intense cold can freeze the water in the body's cells (frostbite). This can result in the loss of parts of your fingers, toes, or ears, for example. Exposure to cold may also cause your overall temperature to drop (hypothermia). The result can be death.

Step 1. Raise body temperature

- In case of frostbite, wrap the area in a soft, loose cloth and seek medical care right away. If medical care is not nearby, hold the affected area under warm (not hot) water until normal skin color returns. Don't soak the affected area for a long time. Don't rub the area. This can cause more tissue damage. Another way to raise temperature is to use body heat. For example, hold the fingers in the armpits. Only try to rewarm the area if you are able to keep the person out of the cold. Warming and then refreezing will make the damage from frostbite worse.
- In case of hypothermia, put the victim in a sleeping bag or wrap them in dry blankets. Be sure to remove any wet clothing first.

Step 2. Give warm liquids

- Give warm liquids if the person is alert and aware of their surroundings. Tea and hot soup are good choices. Warning: Beverages that contain alcohol can make hypothermia worse.

When to seek medical help

Seek medical help right away if either of the following is true:

- The person's fingers, toes, nose, or ears are numb and don't quickly regain feeling when warmed.
- The affected body part looks yellow-white or patchy blue.

Call 911

Call 911 if the victim has any of the following:

- Very cold skin
- Drowsiness, disorientation, or loss of consciousness
- Loss of muscle control

Also:

- Reassure the person and don't leave them alone.
- Keep the person as warm and dry as possible. Don't be alarmed if the person begins to shiver. Shivering is the body's way of generating heat.

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- Treat for shock or do rescue breathing or CPR, if needed.