



Kentucky.gov > News Center > Health and Family Services, Cabinet for > **Press Release**

Health and Family Services Cabinet

Take Steps to Avoid Hypothermia This Winter

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Harsh conditions can be dangerous

With low temperatures, icy conditions and power outages around the state, many Kentuckians could be exposed to harsh winter elements. To prepare for these conditions, Kentucky Department for Public Health (DPH) officials are emphasizing the importance of limiting exposure to the cold and taking other necessary steps to prevent hypothermia.

"In the south, we think of winter as being relatively mild. However, serious threats to health and wellbeing exist," said Gov. Steve Beshear. "I caution everyone to be mindful of health safety tips devised to ward off winter weather-related illness and injury."

Hypothermia occurs when an individual's body temperature drops below what is necessary to achieve normal metabolism and other bodily functions. In severe cases or when the body is not properly warmed, death can result.

"When the thermometer drops, people are at increased risk for hypothermia," said DPH Commissioner William Hacker, M.D. "Steps should be taken to prevent this very serious – and sometimes fatal – condition."

The condition occurs most often when an individual is submerged in icy waters. However, people exposed to cold weather who aren't sufficiently prepared also are at an increased risk for the condition.

To prevent hypothermia, DPH advises that Kentuckians:

- Wear appropriate clothing. Layer clothes made of synthetic and wool fabrics, which are best for keeping warm. Always remember to wear hats, coats, scarves and gloves.
- Avoid consuming alcohol if outdoors. Alcohol can actually speed the loss of heat from the body.
- Avoid overexertion from activities that cause excessive sweat. This can lead to damp clothing, which causes chills.
- Stay as dry as possible.

Individuals working outside during at this time of year should pay extra attention to these guidelines, particularly those susceptible to overexertion. Outdoor workers should make sure they are appropriately dressed and take frequent breaks to warm up and make sure their clothes are sufficient to keep them warm and dry.

Symptoms of hypothermia include shivering, altered speech pattern, abnormally slow rate of breathing, cold pale skin and lethargy. Seek medical attention if you or a loved one experiences the signs of hypothermia.