

Cold Hands Don't Always Mean Warm Heart!

There's a piece of collective wisdom known to medical personnel who work with victims of acute hypothermia. In our world, we don't declare somebody dead until they are "warm and dead."

When the body becomes extraordinarily cold, all the systems begin to slow down, eventually to the point that it can cause death. In some rare cases, though, hypothermia can actually save lives. There are cases where children who have fallen into freezing water were successfully revived even when there was no heartbeat. Their below-normal temperature slowed down their brain function and caused their bodies to use less oxygen.

The case of the 13-month-old Edmonton girl, whose diaper-clad body withstood the frigid blasts of -20 C temperatures, ended happily, but there is the Ottawa woman who froze to death in a snow bank in December 2001. More people die of extreme hypothermia—major loss of body temperature—than survive it.

Hypothermia occurs when body temperature falls and the body loses heat faster than it can produce it. The condition can be life threatening when the body's core temperature falls below 95 degrees. It does not require sub-zero temperatures, and can occur in unexpected places, such as southwestern states and on summer days. Babies and older adults are most vulnerable to the effects of hypothermia.

The signs of hypothermia vary for mild and severe cases. Mild cases occur when the body temperature falls but remains about 95 degrees. The signs and symptoms of mild hypothermia include: The "umbles" such as fumbles, grumbles, mumbles, and stumbles. May also include shivering and a cool abdomen.

Severe cases of hypothermia occur when the body temperature falls below 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Signs and symptoms include: stiff rigid muscles; ice-cold "blue" skin; no shivering; the victim may look dead.

The treatment for hypothermia is simple and can make the difference between living and dying.

--Block the victim from the wind and/or elements so less body heat escapes. Apply blankets or dry clothing for insulation.

--Be as gentle with the victim as possible as rough handling of a victim can cause heartbeat irregularities that could lead to his death.

--In the unresponsive victim, check for breathing and circulation for 30-45 seconds. If the victim is NOT breathing and shows NO signs of circulation, start CPR if you are trained to do so.

--Do NOT give the victim any alcoholic or caffeinated drinks because they increase the likelihood of dehydration.

--Do NOT allow the victim to use tobacco or nicotine, because these substances constrict blood vessels, which increases the risk of frostbite in subfreezing temperatures.

--Do NOT massage the skin of the extremities. Skin rubbing suppresses shivering and dilates blood vessels, which can cause additional heat loss.

--Keep the victim at rest. A horizontal position is best. This helps prevent shock and makes it easier for the heart to maintain blood flow to the brain. This position is best for someone that has been removed from an ice water submersion.

--The best warming method for victims of mild hypothermia is allowing them to shiver inside dry insulation, like extra clothing, blankets, etc. Shivering allows the muscles to create heat inside the body.

--Give the victim high-energy drinks if they are conscious and able to swallow because the sugary fluids will help the body continue shivering. Do NOT give the victim hot drinks. They may taste good and give the victim a psychological boost, but they serve no warming effect whatsoever. Hot drinks send signals to the brain to send more blood to the skin, which leads to more heat loss.

--Do NOT use heating pads or hot packs. If the victim is shivering, the use of these products may stop the shivering. Hypothermic skin is also very sensitive to heat and can easily be burned.

Above all, remain calm. Your calming attitude and speech will help the victim get through the situation.

Hypothermia and frostbite are, for the most part, preventable. Be prepared for the conditions outside. Dress warmly, cover exposed skin and don't let the warm sun fool you in the winter - if the temperature is below freezing, consider yourself at risk and take precautions.

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