



## Staying Safe During Winter Storms & Extreme Cold

As winter approaches, it is essential that people are prepared for extreme temperature changes. Whether inside, outside, or driving, one must take precautions to stay safe during cold winter months.

### WINTER STORMS

One of the most obvious safety concerns are winter storms. Winter storms create a variety of hazards and can have lingering impacts on everyday tasks. Winter storms can range from a moderate snow over a few hours to a blizzard with blinding, wind-driven snow that lasts for several days. It is also common for winter storms to be accompanied by low temperatures, strong winds, icing, sleet, and freezing rain. One of the primary concerns is the winter weather's ability to knock out heat, power and communication services; sometimes for days at a time. The National Weather Service refers to winter storms as "deceptive killers" because most deaths and injuries are indirectly related to the storm. Instead, people are hurt or die in traffic accidents on icy roads, and of hypothermia from prolonged exposure to cold. When a winter storm occurs, awareness of varying hazards will help keep people safe from injuries.

### Be Prepared

The best defense anyone has against a storm is preparation. The following is a list of things one should do prior to winter's arrival, and supplies needed, as recommended by the American Red Cross.

#### *Safety & Preparation Tips*

- Dress in several layers of lightweight clothing, wear mittens and a hat (preferably one that covers your ears)
- Wear waterproof boots
- Minimize travel
- Listen to weather updates on radio or news
- Winterize your vehicle
- Insulate your home
- Maintain heating equipment
- Running water, even at a trickle, helps prevent pipes from freezing
- All fuel-burning equipment should be vented to the outside and kept clear

#### *Recommended Supplies*

- Water (at least 3-day supply; one gallon per person per day)
- Food (at least 3-day supply of non-perishable, easy-to-prepare food)
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- Battery-powered or hand-crank radio
- First Aid Kit
- Medications (7-Day supply) and medical items
- Multi-purpose tool
- Sanitation and hygiene items
- Cell phones with chargers
- Baby supplies
- Warm coats, mittens, hats, boots, etc.
- Extra cash
- Family and emergency contact information

### Vehicle Safety

Make sure vehicles are ready for the winter season. Have a mechanic check the following items: battery, antifreeze, windshield wipers and washer fluid, ignition system, thermostat, lights, exhaust system, heater, brakes, and defroster. Install good winter tires that have adequate tread. It is also a good idea to prepare for an in-car emergency by assembling an emergency kit. This kit may include blankets, plastic bags, extra clothing, a small shovel, a sack of sand or kitty litter, tire chains, windshield scraper, small tools, booster cables and a brightly colored cloth to use as a flag if you are stranded. Travel cannot always be avoided during severe weather. Make sure snow is brushed off the entire vehicle. Pay particular attention to cleaning off headlights and tail lights so other drivers can easily see the vehicle. Adjust speed to road conditions and increase following distance. Remember that bridges and overpasses can be more slippery than other parts of the road. If something happens and you become stranded in the vehicle, stay calm and stay put. Staying in the car will decrease the risk of frostbite or hypothermia and increase the chance of being rescued. Run the engine for heat once/hour, and make sure the exhaust pipe is clear to prevent carbon monoxide from getting into the car. If a cell phone is available, call for help.



## Slips and Falls

It is vital that ice and snow removal operations are adequate. It is essential to remove snow and ice from parking lots, driveways, sidewalks and steps. Ensuring that snow removal and de-icing is a priority will greatly reduce slip and fall hazards. It is important to be aware of ice-covered areas, especially the steps leading into a building. Walking on snow and ice is treacherous and wearing proper footwear is essential. A pair of well insulated boots with good rubber treads is best. When walking on an icy or snow-covered walkway, take short steps and walk at a slower pace. Stock up on standard supplies such as rock salt, sand, and snow shovels. Once snow is removed from walking areas, be sure to de-ice by spreading rock salt and sand immediately. Failure to do so will greatly increase the risk that someone will become hurt or injured due to slippery surfaces. If you are contracting with a company to conduct your snow removal, be sure to include the provision that snow removal and de-icing must be done consecutively. It is important to also be sure that you are obtaining the proper certificates of insurance from your contractor.

## Hypothermia

Hypothermia is a decrease in body temperature below 95 degrees Fahrenheit. It is usually the result of being exposed to extreme cold temperatures for an extended period of time. With hypothermia, the body becomes too cold to function properly. A person with hypothermia can die if not treated promptly. The signs of hypothermia include slurred speech, confused thinking, drowsiness, stiff muscles, a pale, puffy face, and skin that is blotchy and cool to the touch. As hypothermia becomes more severe, the heartbeat may become irregular and weak, breathing may become shallow, muscles become rigid and the person may become unconscious or die.

## Frostbite

Frostbite is the freezing of the skin and body tissues just under the skin. It occurs when parts of the body are exposed to freezing temperatures for too long. The flow of blood to the affected area stops and the tissue becomes damaged. The areas most often affected are nose, cheeks, ears, fingers and toes. In the mildest form of frostbite, the skin will become unusually white and soft and there may be a "pins and needles" feeling in the area. There is usually no permanent damage. In more severe cases of frostbite, the skin will feel waxy, frozen and numb, and may blister. Severe cases of frostbite affect the blood vessels, nerves, muscles tendons, and bone and may lead to permanent damage, blood clots and sometimes gangrene.

In order to avoid frostbite and hypothermia, recognize the environmental and workplace conditions that lead to potential cold-induced illnesses and injuries. Learn the signs and symptoms and what to do to help those who are affected. Select proper clothing for cold, wet and windy conditions. For example, wear a hat, gloves and layers. Victims of cold-induced injuries are often elderly people with inadequate food, clothing, or heating; babies sleeping in cold bedrooms; people who remain outdoors for long periods; for example, the homeless, hikers, etc.; and people who drink alcohol or use illicit drugs.

In all cases of frostbite and hypothermia, prompt medical attention is necessary to prevent infection, possible loss of limb, or even death. While it is natural to assume that hypothermia and frostbite will only occur if exposed to freezing outdoor temperatures, that is not necessarily the case. As mentioned earlier, winter storms have the ability to knock out power for extended periods of time. Without an alternate heating source, people can freeze in their homes.



## INDOOR WINTER HAZARDS

The dangers of winter weather are not only outdoors. It is important to be aware of indoor hazards and to take precautions to keep homes and other buildings safe all winter long.

### Carbon Monoxide (CO)

Carbon monoxide poisoning can happen at any time of year, but the danger increases during winter when doors and windows stay closed and fireplaces, gas heaters or other fuel burning appliances are in use. Never use a generator, grill or other gasoline, propane, natural gas or charcoal burning devices inside a home, garage, basement, crawlspace or any partially enclosed area. Install carbon monoxide alarms near bedrooms and on each floor. Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning are headache, fatigue, dizziness, and shortness of breath. Keep portable space heaters at least three feet from anything that can burn including bedding, furniture, and clothing. Never use a range or oven as a heating source. If you suspect carbon monoxide poisoning, or the CO alarm sounds, leave the home/building and call 911.

### Fire Prevention

Home fires are more prevalent in winter than in any other season. This is due in part to an increase in heat related fires. Winter storms that can interrupt electrical service and cause people to turn to alternative heating sources contribute to the increased risk of fire in winter. While it may be essential to use alternate heating sources in order to keep warm if a storm knocks out power, safety must be a priority. Kerosene heaters, wood burning stoves are good alternate heating sources but can be harmful if not used properly.

### Kerosene Heaters

Be sure that kerosene heaters are legal in your area. Only buy a kerosene heater that is UL listed, meaning the heater has passed all the safety tests. Follow the manufacturer's directions to the letter. There are different types of kerosene heaters and what works with one will not work with the other. Never fill the heater inside the home. Take it outside and do not overfill. It is best to use a kerosene heater that has an emergency shut off in case the heater is tipped over. Never use fuel burning appliances without proper room venting. Burning fuel (coal, kerosene, or propane, for example) can produce deadly fumes. Use only the fuel recommended by the heater manufacturer.

### Wood Stoves and Fireplaces

Wood stoves and fireplaces are a very common heat source. Careful attention to safety can minimize their fire hazard. Fireplaces and wood burning stoves are heating devices that demand care and attention in their purchase, installation, and maintenance. Following these precautions can reduce the possibility of a fire or injury related to their use. Be sure to follow the manufacturers' directions and the local building codes for proper installation, use, and maintenance of wood burning stoves. Have the chimney inspected annually and cleaned if necessary, especially if it has not been used for some time. If you burn wood, the formation of some creosote (soot) is unavoidable. This can lead to a chimney fire. Chimney fires can start quickly and be very powerful, shooting flames many feet above the chimney cap and producing a loud rumble like a freight train going by. Keep flammable materials away from your fireplace mantel. A spark from the fireplace could easily ignite these materials. Never discard hot ashes inside or near the home. Place them in a metal container outside.

It is important to be educated and aware that winter weather can be extremely dangerous given any combination of circumstances. Injuries are often the result in a lack of knowledge and failure to properly prepare and react to the elements of winter weather. It is foolish to assume that people only get hurt outside during the winter, while many devastating incidents occur inside as a result of incorrect use of heating appliances or failure to prepare adequately.

For additional information on winter safety, contact Irwin Siegel Agency's Risk Management Division at [riskmanagement@siegelagency.com](mailto:riskmanagement@siegelagency.com)

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