



How to Treat Hypothermia

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Reviewed

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Hypothermia occurs when your body loses heat faster than it can produce heat. You can get hypothermia if you are exposed to cold weather or are immersed in a cold body of water, like a frozen lake or river. You can also get hypothermia if you are exposed to indoor temperatures below 50°F (10°C) for an extended period of time. The risk of developing hypothermia increases if you are exhausted or dehydrated. If left untreated, hypothermia can be life-threatening.^[1]

Part
1

Recognizing the Symptoms of Hypothermia

- 1 Use a rectal, bladder, or mouth thermometer to check the person's body temperature.** The person's body temperature is one of the most accurate ways to determine the severity of her condition. ^[2]
 - A person with mild hypothermia will have a body temperature of 90°F to 95°F or 32°C to 35°C.
 - A person with moderate hypothermia will have a body temperature of 82°F to 90°F or 28°C to 32°C.
 - A person with severe hypothermia will have a body temperature below 82°F or 28°C.
 - Often, a caregiver will notice if a person is suffering from symptoms of hypothermia, as the condition can cause poor judgement, confusion, and changes in behavior in the person. The affected person may not realize she has hypothermia and will need to be checked to confirm her condition.
- 2 Check for symptoms of mild hypothermia.** These include: ^{[3][4]}
 - Constant shivering.
 - Tiredness and low energy.
 - Cold or pale skin.
 - Hyperventilation. This is when the person has difficulty breathing or has shallow or muffled breathing.
 - The person may also have slurred speech and be unable to do basic tasks like pick up objects or move around the room.
- 3 Note any symptoms of moderate hypothermia.** These include: ^{[5][6]}
 - Confusion or drowsiness.
 - Tiredness and low energy.
 - Cold or pale skin.
 - Hyperventilation, and slow or shallow breathing.
 - A person with moderate hypothermia will usually stop shivering completely and may have slurred speech or poor judgement. He may try to shed his clothing even though he is cold. These are signs his condition is deteriorating and require immediate medical attention.
- 4 Get immediate medical attention if any symptoms are present.** Even if the person is suffering from mild hypothermia, you should seek medical care for her right away. Mild hypothermia can turn into a more severe condition if it is not treated. ^{[7][8]}
 - Bring the person to the hospital if she is unconscious and has a weak pulse. These are all signs of severe hypothermia. Someone with severe hypothermia may appear to be dead, but it's important to call emergency services right away to determine if she is in a state of hypothermia and can still be treated. This is a life-threatening situation.
 - Medical treatment can still be used to resuscitate people with severe hypothermia, though it is not always successful.

5 Check your baby's skin if you suspect he has hypothermia. Babies with hypothermia may look healthy, but their skin will feel cold, they may be unusually quiet, or refuse to feed.^[9]

- If you suspect your baby has hypothermia, call 911 to ensure he gets medical care right away.

Part
2

Treating the Symptoms While Waiting for Medical Care

1 Call 911. No matter what type of hypothermia the person is experiencing, it's important to call 911 for immediate medical care. The first half hour after the person's symptoms become clear are the most critical phase of hypothermia management. You can treat the person while you wait for the ambulance or medical professionals to arrive.^[10]

2 Move the person out of the cold. Place her in a room-temperature spot indoors. If going indoors isn't possible, protect the person from the wind with other clothing, especially around her neck and head.^[11]

- Use towels, blankets, or other clothing to protect the person from the cold ground.
- Don't let the person help in her own treatment, as this will only expend more of her energy and worsen her condition.^[12]

3 Remove any wet clothing. Replace her wet clothing with warm, dry clothing or blankets.^[13]

4 Warm the person's core up gradually. Avoid rewarming the person too quickly with a heating lamp or a hot bath. Instead, apply warm, dry compresses to the center of her body, on his neck, chest, and groin area.^[14]

- If you use hot water bottles or a hot pack, wrap them in a towel before applying them to these areas.
- Do not attempt to warm his arms, hands, and legs. Heating or massaging these limbs can cause stress on his heart and lungs, and could lead to other serious health issues.^[15]
- Do not try to warm up the person by rubbing his body with your hands. This will only irritate his skin and cause shock to his body.^[16]

5 Give the person warm, sweet non-alcoholic drinks. Ask her if she can swallow before you offer her any liquids or food. Herbal tea that is caffeine-free or hot water with lemon and honey are good options. Sugar in the beverage can help to boost her energy. You can also offer her high energy foods like chocolate.^[17]

- Avoid giving the person alcohol as it will slow down the rewarming process. Don't give her cigarettes or tobacco products. These products can interfere with her circulation and slow down the rewarming process.^[18]

6 Keep the person warm and dry. Once the person's body temperature has increased and some of his symptoms have lessened, keep him wrapped in dry, warm blankets or towels until medical help arrives.^[19]

7 Perform CPR if the person shows no signs of life. If the person is not breathing, coughing, or moving around and her pulse has slowed down, you may need to perform CPR. To perform CPR correctly:^[20]

- Locate the center of the person's chest. Identify the space between her ribs, a bone called the sternum.
- Place the heel of one hand over the center of her chest. Put your other hand over the first and interlace your fingers. Keep your elbows straight and align your shoulders over your hands.
- Begin compressions. Push down on the center of her chest as hard as possible. Pump at least 30 times, hard and fast. Do this to rate of at least 100/minutes. You can pump to the beat of the disco hit "Stayin' Alive" to maintain a steady rhythm.^[21] Allow the person's chest to rise fully after every pump.
- Tilt the person's head back and lift her chin. Pinch her nose and cover her mouth with yours. Blow until you see her chest rise. Give two breaths. Each breath should take one second.
- CPR is to be continued for a prolonged period. There have been reports of younger patients with severe hypothermia surviving an hour of CPR. If there is another person present, try switching off performing CPR so you don't become exhausted.

Part
3**Getting Medical Attention**

- 1 Let the medical attendant determine the severity of the person's condition.** Once the ambulance arrives, the emergency medical technician, or EMT, will assess the person's condition.^[22]
 - A person with mild to moderate hypothermia and no other injuries or issues will likely not need to be taken to the hospital. The EMT may recommend more home treatment, with gradual rewarming of the person. But a person with more severe hypothermia will need to be observed in the hospital.

- 2 Allow the medical attendant to perform CPR if necessary.** If you have called for an ambulance and the person is unconscious or unresponsive, the emergency medical technician will likely perform CPR.^[23]

- 3 Ask the doctor about a cardiopulmonary bypass if the hypothermia is severe.** Once the person arrives at the hospital, speak to the doctor about possible treatment options, especially if the hypothermia is severe.
 - Cardiopulmonary bypass is when blood is withdrawn from the body, warmed up, and then returned to the body. This is also known as extra corporeal membranous oxygenation (ECMO).^[24]
 - This technique is only available at major hospitals that have specialist emergency services or units that regularly perform heart surgery.
 - A person with severe hypothermia often stands a better chance of surviving if she is taken directly to one of these hospitals, even if it means bypassing a smaller hospital along the way. Alternatives to cardiopulmonary bypass include warmed iv fluids, chest tubes with warm irrigation, and/or warmed hemodialysis.

Community Q&A**Which is the appropriate first aid response for a person suffering hypothermia?**

Move the person indoors or somewhere warm as soon as possible. Once the person is in a warm environment, carefully remove any wet clothing and dry them. Wrap them in warm blankets, towels, or coats (whatever you have available), protecting their head and torso first.

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Can hypothermia be deadly?

Yes, it can if you are exposed for too long or it is not treated properly.

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Sources and Citations

1. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/first-aid/first-aid-hypothermia/basics/ART-20056624>
2. http://www.medicinenet.com/hypothermia_extended_exposure_to_cold/page4.htm#what_is_the_treatment_for_hypothermia
3. <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Hypothermia/Pages/Symptoms.aspx>

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