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Cold weather brings hypothermia threat

Low winter temperatures have brought warnings from experts in the Oregon Department of Human Services State Public Health Division.

Exposure to cold can lead to hypothermia, so it is important to protect yourself against it.

Hypothermia occurs when heat escapes from your body faster than it can warm itself and your body's core body temperature falls lower than 95 degrees F. Severe hypothermia can lead to death.

Symptoms of mild hypothermia include uncontrollable shivering and numbness of the hands.

This often happens in temperatures below 50 degrees F., wind, wet clothing and fatigue.

The poor, the elderly, people who have hypothyroidism, those who take sedative-hypnotics, and drug and alcohol abusers are prone to chronic hypothermia. People who abuse drugs or alcohol can fail to recognize hypothermia symptoms. They can have serious problems during a cold wave when the power goes out, if there is a problem with the heating system or they cannot afford to pay heating bills.

Hypothermia is preventable. Be aware of the risk factors and early warning signs. Dress appropriately both indoors and when you are outside during this cold weather.

Dr. Mel Kohn, acting director of the State Public Health Division, said that every year about 8 to 10 people die from hypothermia in Oregon.

"There are things that individuals and communities can do to help prevent these deaths," Kohn said.

Children should be monitored in cold weather and should be checked every hour to make sure their clothes are dry.

Older adults can die of hypothermia if their homes have inadequate heat. Check in with older neighbors and relatives and those with disabilities during cold weather. Offer to shovel walks, go shopping for them and take out trash. Check on friends and family members who abuse drugs or alcohol.

If your heat goes out, or you cannot afford to keep your home warm, contact the Red Cross to find the warming station nearest to you, on the Web at <http://www.oregonredcross.org/>

For more information go to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention hypothermia Web site: <http://emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/staysafe/hypothermia.asp>

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