

# Risk Communication Toolkit for Winter Weather



Developed for Oregon Local Health Departments by the  
Oregon Health Authority, Public Health Division  
Health Security, Preparedness, and Response Program

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Risk Communication Toolkit for Winter Weather has been designed to assist with messaging during and after a winter or extreme cold weather event. The most likely health impacts from a winter weather emergency include the following:

- frostbite
- hypothermia
- carbon monoxide poisoning
- injuries
- power outages and food safety

In order to effectively and efficiently use the communication materials included in this Toolkit, the following items from your county's or tribe's communication plan are necessary:

- Media Contact List
- Local Partners Contact List
- Special Populations List
- Policies for Clearance
- Policies for Disseminating Messages

Also, for resources specific to winter weather, please refer to your local health department's emergency operations plan.

## KEY MESSAGES FOR WINTER WEATHER

The Crisis Phase is characterized by uncertainty, shortened response time, and intense media interest. The public is seeking timely and accurate facts about what happened, where it happened, and what is being done to address the crisis. They will question the magnitude of the crisis, the immediacy of the threat to them, the duration of the threat, and who is going to fix it.

Communicators should be prepared to answer these questions as quickly, accurately, and fully as possible. Simplicity, credibility, verifiability, consistency, and speed count when communicating in the initial phases of an emergency.



**Goal: Provide up-to-date and accurate information to empower decision-making and prompt action**

- Provide available information on current event
- Explain the risks of this hazard
- Provide self-efficacy messages about safety and how and where to get more information
- Explain the process of what your local health department is doing

## **KEY MESSAGES: PREVENTING CARBON MONOXIDE POISONING**

With cold temperatures, we want to stay warm, but using space heaters and even wood fires increase carbon monoxide in the air. This can lead to potential carbon monoxide poisonings.

### **Carbon monoxide poisoning prevention**

- If carbon monoxide poisoning is suspected, seek fresh air and call 9-1-1 or the Oregon Poison Control Center: 1-800-222-1222
- Make sure to check your carbon monoxide detector or install one if you don't have one.
- Check heating systems, chimney flues, and gas appliances every year. Get them cleaned and serviced as needed by qualified heating/appliance contractors.
- Use caution with kerosene or gas space heaters. Use vented space heaters whenever possible, and always make sure they are cleaned and inspected. Never use a gas range or oven to heat a home.
- Use charcoal grills, hibachis, or portable camping stoves outside your home, garage, basement, tent or camper. Using them indoors or in an enclosed space can produce dangerous levels of carbon monoxide.
- Never run a portable generator or any gasoline-powered engine inside a basement, garage, camper or other enclosed structure, even if doors and windows are open.
- Never leave the motor running in a vehicle parked in an enclosed or partially enclosed space, such as a garage.

### **Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning**

- Headache
- Dizziness
- Weakness
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- chest pain
- confusion

## **KEY MESSAGES: PREVENTING FROSTBITE**

Reduce your time outdoors if possible. If you are going out for extended periods of time, make sure to cover exposed skin. Wear a hat, scarf, mittens or gloves. Dress in layers and stay dry.

Frostbite is an injury to the body that is caused by freezing. Frostbite causes a loss of feeling and color in affected areas.

### **Symptoms**

- a white or grayish-yellow skin area
- skin that feels unusually firm or waxy
- numbness

### **What to do**

- Get into a warm room as soon as possible.
- Unless absolutely necessary, do not continue walking on frostbitten feet or toes—this increases the damage.
- Immerse the affected area in warm water or warm the affected area using body heat.
- Seek medical attention as soon as possible.

## **KEY MESSAGES: PREVENTING HYPOTHERMIA**

When outside, make sure to watch for symptoms of hypothermia. When exposed to cold temperatures, your body begins to lose heat faster than it can be produced. Prolonged exposure to cold will eventually use up your body's stored energy. The result is hypothermia, or abnormally low body temperature. Body temperature that is too low affects the brain, making the victim unable to think clearly or move well.

### **Symptoms**

Adults:

- shivering, exhaustion
- confusion, fumbling hands
- memory loss, slurred speech
- drowsiness

Infants:

- bright red, cold skin
- very low energy

### **What to do**

- If someone has these symptoms, call 9-1-1.
- Try to get the person into a warm area, remove any wet clothing.
- If they are conscious, give them warm liquids and try to warm the body as much as possible.

## **SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE #1 FOR WINTER WEATHER**

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Media contact: [Name], [Phone], [Email]  
[Health Department or other Website]

### **(County) Public Health Offers Cold Weather Health and Safety Tips**

[City, State] - With the arrival of frigid winter weather, (NAME) Health Department reminds residents to take necessary precautions to prevent serious health and safety concerns. Preparing for exposure to colder temperatures can mean the difference between staying healthy and the possibility of serious injury or even death.

When exposed to cold temperatures, the human body loses heat faster than it generates it. Prolonged exposure to cold eventually uses up the body's stored energy and can result in a serious condition called hypothermia, characterized by abnormally low body temperature. Hypothermia is most likely to occur at very cold temperatures, but can occur even at temperatures above 40° F, if a person becomes chilled from rain, sweat or submersion in cold water.

“Winter weather can cause many health related injuries like frostbite, hypothermia, and falling on slippery or icy sidewalks and paths,” said XXXX, enter title. “Cold weather can also put an extra strain on the heart. People should make sure to dress warm, keep outdoor trips brief and take breaks when shoveling or chopping wood.”

Frostbite is another injury to the body caused by freezing, and results in a loss of feeling and color in affected areas. It most often affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers or toes. Frostbite can permanently damage the body, and severe cases can lead to amputation. The risk of frostbite is increased in people with reduced blood circulation and among people who are not dressed properly for extremely cold temperatures.

If you have heart disease or high blood pressure, follow your doctor's advice about shoveling snow, chopping wood or performing other hard work in the cold. Otherwise, if you have to do active outdoor chores, dress warmly and work slowly. Because the body already is working hard just to stay warm, it is possible to get overheated, as well.

Health officials recommend the following tips to help keep you and your family safe and healthy during extremely cold weather:

- Try to stay indoors when weather is extremely cold, especially if winds are high.
- If you must go outdoors, make trips outside as brief as possible.
- When going outside during very cold weather, adults and children should wear:
  - a hat
  - a scarf or knit mask to cover face and mouth
  - sleeves that are snug at the wrist
  - insulated and waterproof mittens or gloves

- several layers of loose-fitting, thermal wear or material that “wicks” moisture off the skin
- a water-resistant or tightly woven coat
- two layers of socks with boots or shoes that are waterproof and have a flexible sole

Walking on ice is also extremely dangerous. Many cold weather injuries result from falls on ice-covered sidewalks, steps, driveways and porches. Keep your steps and walkways as free of ice as possible by using rock salt or another chemical de-icing compound. Sand or even cat litter may also be used on walkways to reduce the risk of slipping.

**To find more cold weather safety tips, visit**

<http://public.health.oregon.gov/Preparedness/Prepare/Pages/PrepareForWinterStorms.aspx>

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## **SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE #2 FOR WINTER WEATHER**

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Media contact: [Name], [Phone], [Email]

[Health Department or other Website]

### **Protect yourself in extremely cold conditions**

[City, Oregon] - The National Weather Service reports that bitterly cold air along with any sustained winds will produce dangerously low wind chill temperatures of below zero Friday night through Sunday morning. People should dress appropriately in layered clothing and cover any exposed skin to prevent frost bite.

Frost bite and hypothermia can occur in less than 30 minutes. Pets and livestock need a warm dry shelter and access to food and fresh unfrozen water.

### **What to do during a winter storm**

- Keep posted on weather conditions. Listen to local media sources or your [NOAA weather radio](#).
- Prepare for isolation at home. Keep an [emergency kit](#) on hand.
- Use lights for heat if the furnace goes out. Don't use gas cooking stoves.
- Check with neighbors and relatives who may need extra assistance.
- Prevent wood/oil-burning stoves, fireplaces, or electric heaters from overheating and becoming fire hazards. Fill all liquid fuel heating devices outside buildings.
- Stay indoors. Overexertion from activities such as snow shoveling is a major cause of winter storm deaths.
- Dress in warm layers.
- Travel only if necessary, and then only in daylight on major roads. Check Oregon's Department of Transportation [Trip Check](#) or call 5-1-1 before heading out.
- Do not travel alone and let someone know your schedule and destination.

### **If caught in a vehicle:**

- Don't leave the vehicle unless help is in sight.
- Ensure proper ventilation while running the engine.
- Signal trouble by raising the hood, tying a cloth on the antenna, or turning on flashers.
- Don't burn anything in the vehicle.

To find more cold weather safety tips, visit <http://public.health.oregon.gov/Preparedness/Prepare/Pages/PrepareForWinterStorms.aspx>

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## **PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEETS FOR WINTER WEATHER**

The following fact sheets are available for download. If your agency needs these documents in additional formats, please contact your [preparedness or hospital liaison](#).

### **Frostbite Facts**

[http://public.health.oregon.gov/DiseasesConditions/CommunicableDisease/PreparednessSurveillanceEpidemiology/Documents/frostbite\\_nov2011.pdf](http://public.health.oregon.gov/DiseasesConditions/CommunicableDisease/PreparednessSurveillanceEpidemiology/Documents/frostbite_nov2011.pdf)

### **Hypothermia Facts**

[http://public.health.oregon.gov/DiseasesConditions/CommunicableDisease/PreparednessSurveillanceEpidemiology/Documents/hypo\\_nov2011.pdf](http://public.health.oregon.gov/DiseasesConditions/CommunicableDisease/PreparednessSurveillanceEpidemiology/Documents/hypo_nov2011.pdf)

### **Preventing Carbon Monoxide Poisoning After an Emergency**

<http://public.health.oregon.gov/Preparedness/Prepare/Documents/OHA8632CarbonMonoxidefactsheet.pdf>

### **Keeping Food Safe During an Emergency**

[http://public.health.oregon.gov/Preparedness/Prepare/Documents/OHA8631\\_2013\\_Food\\_Safety\\_after\\_an\\_Emergency.pdf](http://public.health.oregon.gov/Preparedness/Prepare/Documents/OHA8631_2013_Food_Safety_after_an_Emergency.pdf)

## **PUBLIC HEALTH WEBPAGES FOR WINTER WEATHER**

### **Oregon Public Health Winter Weather Webpage**

<http://public.health.oregon.gov/Preparedness/Prepare/Pages/PrepareForWinterStorms.aspx>  
[x](#)

### **Oregon Public Health Carbon Monoxide Webpage**

<http://public.health.oregon.gov/Preparedness/CurrentHazards/Pages/CarbonMonoxidePoisoning.aspx>

### **Oregon Public Health Current Hazards Webpage**

<http://public.health.oregon.gov/Preparedness/CurrentHazards/Events/Pages/index.aspx>

## **SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES FOR WINTER WEATHER**

### **Twitter Messages**

*The following messages can be posted on your local health agency's Twitter feed. All posts are 140 or fewer characters.*

*In addition to the suggestions below, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's @CDCReady and @CDCEmergency feeds can be retweeted as relevant information and links are tweeted.*

### **Tweets**

Storm coming? Portable generators produce poison gas carbon monoxide. Run generator >20 ft from home, doors, and windows.

Staying safe before, during and after #winter weather. Get safety tips from #Oregon Health Authority: <http://1.usa.gov/MY2Js3>

Visit ODOT's trip check for the latest weather conditions.  
<http://www.tripcheck.com/Pages/RCmap.asp?curRegion=0&mainNav=RoadConditions>

Winter cold is here. Gas and oil furnaces produce poison gas carbon monoxide. Keep your family safe. Inspect your furnace ASAP. #Oregon

Avoid carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning: install CO detectors, have furnace checked regularly, keep portable generator >20 ft from home. #Oregon

Did your power go out? Use [FoodSafety.gov](http://www.foodsafety.gov) food charts to help you decide what to keep and what to toss. <http://tinyurl.com/p9j6rll>

Is your food safe after a power outage?  
[http://www.foodsafety.gov/keep/charts/refridg\\_food.html](http://www.foodsafety.gov/keep/charts/refridg_food.html)

Be safe when using chainsaws for downed tree removal: <http://tinyurl.com/p5w2dtm>

### **Facebook Posts**

*All of the above tweets can be cross posted as Facebook messages, but the following suggestions have images and links that can also be posted. For more suggestions, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/cdcemergency> to repost useful links, webpages, photos, and tips.*

Did you know that you can get the latest weather updates from your smartphone? Mobile users will receive a text message if you are entering a storm area. Find out if your phone receives wireless emergency alerts from the Commercial Mobile Alert System:

[http://www.ctia.org/consumer\\_info/safety/index.cfm/AID/12082](http://www.ctia.org/consumer_info/safety/index.cfm/AID/12082)

Want to know if your morning commute has been impacted by bad weather? Visit Trip Check to get the latest road conditions:

<http://www.tripcheck.com/Pages/RCmap.asp?curRegion=0&mainNav=RoadConditions>

If you are out driving during a storm warning, stay in your vehicle if you get stuck. Learn more safety tips at <http://1.usa.gov/MY2Js3>

We are seeing a lot of pictures on Facebook of winter weather. Dress warmly and wear proper boots when venturing out! Learn more safety tips at <http://1.usa.gov/MY2Js3>

Do you know what to do if the power goes out? Is your emergency kit ready to go? Do you have all the necessary supplies? Build an emergency kit on budget today. Learn what you can do to prepare today:

<http://public.health.oregon.gov/Preparedness/Prepare/Pages/BuidKit.aspx>

Winter weather can cause power outages. Call your local power company to report outages. If you use a generator, make sure to place it outside the home. Incorrect generator use can lead to CO poisoning from the toxic engine exhaust, electric shock, or electrocution and fire.

Are you still in a storm warning? Get the latest weather updates from the NWS Oregon Facebook page. <http://www.facebook.com/US.NationalWeatherService.Portland.gov>

Ever heard of the phrase “adding insult to injury”? Well, in the case of a disaster, adding injury can make everything ten times worse. Check out the link below and learn about basic tips to keeping yourself and your family safe after a disaster.

<http://public.health.oregon.gov/Preparedness/CurrentHazards/Pages/InjuryPrevention.aspx>

If your home was without power, your food may be at risk. Perishable foods can rapidly grow bacteria when kept at improper temperatures. Educate yourself on proper food storage and health risks of food after a winter storm. Use [FoodSafety.gov](http://www.foodsafety.gov) food charts to help you decide what to keep and what to toss.

Did you know that Carbon Monoxide is tasteless, colorless, and odorless? Carbon Monoxide leaks are common in homes and businesses that have been affected by floods. Learn more about the signs and symptoms of Carbon Monoxide poisoning and how to prevent leaks from happening in your home or business. <http://1.usa.gov/1kOank3>

Chain saws can be great labor saving tools to clear debris after a disaster. But, if not operated properly and with respect, they can quickly cause severe injury and death. Visit the site below for more safety information on chain saw operation.

<http://public.health.oregon.gov/Preparedness/CurrentHazards/Pages/InjuryPrevention.aspx#chainsaw>

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