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Dept. of Health Services: Health agency reminds state residents that cold can be deadly

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Having already seen record-breaking cold this year, and with frigid temperatures in the forecast for most of the state this week, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) wants to remind residents to take steps to be safe and stay warm as temperatures fall. Last winter, 75 people died from exposure to cold across Wisconsin. The number of deaths was 36% higher than average over the past few winters, likely due to the sustained extreme cold and higher-than-average snowfall seen across the state last winter.

“Freezing temperatures, wind chill, and winter storms create unsafe conditions and can cause frostbite, hypothermia, and even death,” said Dr. Jonathan Meiman, a Chief Medical Officer in the Division of Public Health. “The best way to stay safe during extreme cold is to be prepared.”

Those at high risk of hypothermia and death include older adults, people who drink alcohol or use illicit drugs, and individuals who remain outdoors for long periods of time such as the homeless, hunters, and hikers. Alcohol intoxication was a contributing factor in over 25% of the deaths last winter, and males using alcohol or illicit drugs were more likely to die from the cold, compared to females.

Older residents are at the highest risk: the average age of persons who died from cold last winter was 66 years. Individuals over 65 were significantly more likely to die due to slips, trips, and falls, reinforcing the need for extra caution when going outdoors or into unheated garages or porches. Many of these deaths occurred because of unwitnessed falls, which highlights the importance of routinely checking in with older friends, families, or neighbors.

To protect yourself and your family through the winter, follow these safety tips:

- Create a home emergency kit. Your home kit should include items such as food and water, cell phone and charger, flashlight and batteries, first aid kit, important medications, a weather radio, and a change of clothes. Our partners at ReadyWisconsin have other suggestions for what to include in your kit(link is external).
- Winterize your car. Just as you have a home emergency kit, you need one for your car too(link is external). Pack items such as blankets, snacks and water, a shovel, jumper cables, and sand. Keep your gas tank at least half-full.
- Dress in layers. If you have to venture out, dress in several loose-fitting layers, and cover any exposed skin. Wear a hat, mittens, and snow boots. Use a scarf to cover your mouth and face.
- Know the signs and symptoms of hypothermia. Warning signs include shivering, exhaustion, confusion, and slurred speech, and symptoms can look similar to intoxication. Hypothermia can begin when outdoor temperatures are as warm as 40-50°F. Call 911 if someone is exposed to cold temperatures and you see these symptoms.
- Limit outdoor time for pets. Extreme cold is dangerous for animals too.
- During extreme cold, stay inside. When possible, stay indoors.