

Hypothermia

Recognition & Prevention

A serious medical condition in which a person's body temperature falls below the usual level (>35°C) as a result of being in severe cold for a long time

With thanks to NHS Frimley ICB,
Safeguarding Team
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High risk groups

- People with cardiovascular conditions
- People with mental health conditions
- Older people (65 and older)
- Pregnant women
- People who move in and out of homelessness
- People who have attended hospital due to a fall
- People with respiratory conditions (COPD, asthma)
- People with disabilities
- Young children (under five)
- People on a low income
- People with drug or alcohol addictions
- Recent immigrants and asylum-seekers

Signs & symptoms

- Shivering
- Pale skin, blue lips
- Slurred speech or mumbling
- Slow, shallow breathing
- Weak pulse
- Clumsiness or lack of co-ordination
- Drowsiness or very low energy
- Confusion or memory loss
- Loss of consciousness



Safeguarding considerations

- 1 What factors could have led to the hypothermia?
- 2 If a child has hypothermia in the context of possible abuse or neglect, have you made a safeguarding children referral?
- 3 If an adult with care and support needs has hypothermia (e.g., a disabled person being cared for by family), have you considered raising an Adult Safeguarding Concern?
- 4 If the person is in a nursing home or residential care, have you considered raising an Adult Safeguarding Concern/spoken to your Safeguarding Lead?
- 5 Are there any other household members at risk, such as children or other adults with care and support needs?
- 6 Is there any Self-Neglect/Hoarding? Does the person have mental capacity? If so, consider appropriate action.
- 7 Does the person have any history of severe mental illness, alcohol dependence or substance misuse?
- 8 Are there any potential future risks to the individual and to the wider community e.g., use of unsafe open fires, where the chimney may not have been swept/old gas fires which could be hazardous?
- 9 Is the person a victim of economic (financial) abuse and cannot afford heating?
- 10 Is there any risk of exploitation or cuckooing?

Immediate treatment

- **Do** call 999 ambulance
- **Do** remove any wet clothing or pads
- **Do** warm patient up slowly with blankets and a hat
- **Do** give warm drink or soup
- **Do** give a high calorie snack, like chocolate
- **Do** keep the patient awake and talking until help arrives
- **Don't** rewarm the patient too quickly, such as with a heater or hot bath
- **Don't** attempt to warm the arms and legs – heating and massaging the limbs can stress the heart and lungs
- **Don't** give the patient alcohol or a cigarette

Tips for safety and prevention

- 1 Consider giving opportunistic advice during consultations with older people on staying warm and well at home this winter (warm clothing, thermal vests and layers, hats, thick socks, warm drinks, good nutrition and getting up and moving regularly)
- 2 Be inquisitive when on home visits:
 - Does the environment feel cold? Is the central heating on? Is the patient able to access hot drinks and meals?Raise any concerns with the appropriate person (care home manager/ carer)
- 3 Is the patient using a small gas heater or paraffin heater without adequate ventilation?
 - **THINK** carbon monoxide
 - **THINK** fire risk
- 4 Refer patient to a Social Prescriber at the GP surgery for support with accessing Winter Fuel Payments, boiler services etc
- 5 Signpost to Age UK website: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/keep-well-this-winter/stay-healthy-in-winterstay-healthy-in-winter>
- 6 Whilst it's important to keep infants warm, families should be encouraged to follow safe sleep messages to avoid over heating:
<https://www.lullabytrust.org.uk/safer-sleep-advice/safer-sleep-winter/>



Learning from Safety Incidents
Issue 8: Hypothermia²

Hypothermia can develop in vulnerable people after a relatively short exposure to cold weather.

It can even develop after a small drop in room temperature.

Many people who use Health & Social Care services may be at risk of developing hypothermia. They include:

- Older people in Care Homes or receiving care at home
- People with reduced mental capacity, reduced mobility or a sensory impairment
- People who cannot communicate that they are exposed to cold

1 Excess winter deaths and illness and the health risks associated with cold home: NICE Guideline [NG6], published 05/03/15

2 <https://www.cqc.org.uk/guidance-providers/learning-safety-incidents/issue-8-hypothermia>

3 <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/hypothermia/>