

# HYPOTHERMIA

Hypothermia is usually caused by prolonged exposure to cold. When more heat is lost than the body can generate, hypothermia can result. It is accelerated by wet or damp clothing or sudden contact with cold water. Common causes include wearing wet clothing for a prolonged period of time in windy weather, heavy exertion, or poor fluid or food intake. Anyone can suffer from hypothermia, but some get cold faster than others and should always be watched carefully in cold conditions, as they may not realize what is happening to them. Those most likely to experience hypothermia are those who are very old, very young, or very thin; those who have heart or circulation problems; and people who are hungry, tired, or under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

## Prevention

- **Prepare for the worst conditions** and take extra clothing.
- **Wear suitable clothing** in cold weather; wind-proof and water-resistant clothing.
- **Avoid overheating and sweating.** Wear loose, layered clothing that “breathes”. Cotton wets easily and dries slowly; wool is warm even when wet; and polypropylene and polyester are superior next to the skin.
- **Avoid long-term cooling.** Take tea breaks often when working to allow a chance to get out of the wind. DO NOT continue to work if you are getting seriously cold. If you try to tough it out, your judgement may fade before you realize it, and you may make other mistakes.
- **Eat often** to provide “fuel” for your “furnace”. Sugars and starches work most quickly.
- **Drink lots**, but avoid alcohol, as it may speed cooling. Dehydration is a factor in most cases of exposure. Hot sweet drinks are best, but cold water is fine if nothing hot is available. DO NOT eat snow if you are cold.
- **Keep your big muscles moving** to create heat. If your fingers or toes are cold, wiggling them won’t make them warm but exercising the large muscles of your arms and legs will. Swing your arms vigorously to warm your hands or put your hands in your armpits.
- **Check your partners often.** If they get clumsy, shiver, slur their speech, or act strangely, suspect exposure. Remember, they may not realize what is happening.

## Mild Exposure

What to look for:

- Can answer questions intelligently
- Complains of being cold
- Is probably shivering
- May slur his words
- Has probably lost interest in what he is doing

What to do:

- Stop working
- Prevent any further loss of body heat
- Get him into shelter. If no shelter is available, get him out of the wind, cover their head and insulate them from the cold ground.
- Replace any wet or constricting clothing

- Allow shivering to continue as it is the most efficient way for the body to restore its temperature
- Give him food and/or sweet hot drinks
- DO NOT give him alcohol!
- Seek medical attention

First-aiders should be aware that active re-warming will probably turn off the shivering mechanism. Resist the pressure to use external heat sources. If the casualty is so cold that shivering has stopped, active re-warming is essential.

In the bush, heat loss may be temporarily slowed by wrapping the person in plastic bags or tarps as well as sleeping bags or clothing. These stop wind chill and some evaporative loss.

Warmth may be provided by almost any means to correct mild hypothermia. Skin-to-skin contact, while not very effective, may be the only choice when there is little other warmth to be found. If you use hot-water bottles or heat packs, use them with great caution. They must be wrapped in several layers of cloth to prevent burning the casualty.

### **Moderate Exposure**

What to look for:

- Is confused and illogical
- Doesn't want to move much, may be sleepy
- May leave clothes open, take them off
- Is clumsy and stumbles
- Stops shivering
- Shows signs of muscle stiffness
- Has slow breath and pulse rates
- May have a fruity odour to breath
- May have dilated pupils
- May urinate in clothing

What to do:

- Treat same as for mild exposure, except;
- DO NOT give fluids to drink until he is wide awake and understands what is going on. Because he is uncoordinated, he may choke on fluids.
- NEVER handle anyone in moderate or severe exposure roughly, or allow him to move much, because his heart will be very sensitive and may start fibrillating with fatal results.

***\* Provided as general information only. A physician should always be consulted for diagnosis and treatment of any and all medical conditions.***