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Hypothermia

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Summary

- Hypothermia occurs when the body's temperature falls below 35 °C.
- Hypothermia can occur in any situation where the body is losing more heat to the environment than it is generating.
- Severe hypothermia is life-threatening without prompt medical attention.

Hypothermia occurs when the body's temperature falls below 35 °C. The human body has a number of systems that maintain a constant core temperature of around 37 °C. A person doesn't have to be in sub zero temperatures to risk hypothermia – it only requires the environmental temperature to be less than the body temperature and a person will “donate” heat to the atmosphere.

If the heat generated by the body – and people are constantly generating heat through metabolic processes and muscle movements – is less than that lost to the environment, then their temperature will begin to fall.

The four ways that the human body loses heat include:

- **conduction** – by direct transfer from the body to an object that is cooler than the body (for example, lying on a cold surface will pass body warmth to the surface away from the body)
- **convection** – air or liquid flow across the skin drawing off heat (for example, wind will increase heat loss, as will water that is cooler than body temperature)
- **radiation** – electromagnetic waves distribute heat into the ambient environment (for example, exposed skin will allow heat to be drawn off if the air temperature is less than the body – the exposed head of a person is a strong source of heat loss, particularly in children)
- **evaporation** – fluid on the skin turns to vapour, drawing off heat (moist skin will lose heat more rapidly, such as in someone who is wet, clammy or has exposed moist skin, such as burns).

Sometimes, medical conditions can lead to hypothermia. For example, someone suffering a stroke or a person with diabetes suffering a hypoglycaemic episode may end up lying immobile for a period of time, unable to protect themselves from hypothermia.

The natural response to becoming cold is two-fold, including:

- **Behavioural** – the person will try and move around to generate heat, and seek shelter from further heat loss.
- **Physiological** – the body shunts blood to the core to keep it warm, hair stands on end to trap a layer of warm air around us (goose bumps), we shiver to make more heat and our body releases hormones to speed up our metabolism to create more heat.

If these measures don't work, hypothermia will result.

Symptoms of hypothermia

Hypothermia can be distinguished into three stages – mild, moderate or severe. The signs and symptoms of hypothermia can be approximately grouped with the temperature ranges of the different stages:

For mild hypothermia (35-32 °C), signs and symptoms include:

- pale and cool to touch as blood vessels constrict in the skin
- numbness in the extremities
- sluggish responses, drowsiness or lethargic
- shivering
- increased heart rate and breathing.

For moderate hypothermia (32-28 °C), signs and symptoms include:

- decreasing conscious state
- may have been incontinent of urine as a result of an increased workload on the kidneys related to blood being shunted to the major organs
- no longer shivering
- slowed heart rate, breathing rate and low blood pressure.

For severe hypothermia (below 28 °C), signs and symptoms include:

- unconscious and no longer responding
- the heart beats more slowly and may become irregular before ultimately stopping if the person gets too cold
- no response to light in the pupil of the eye
- rigid muscles – the person might feel like they are in rigor mortis
- pulses and respiratory effort may be present but hard to detect.

Myth about hypothermia

One hypothermia myth is that you lose more heat through your head than any other part of your body. This is not true. Heat loss occurs through any area of skin exposed to the environment. An adult head is approximately 10 per cent of the surface area of their whole body.

Most of the time, the rest of our bodies are covered, with the possible exception of our hands (which together only make up about four per cent of our surface area), so we feel cold, because our head is cold compared to the rest of our insulated body.

If a person had to expose another part of their body – for example, their abdomen, which also makes up about 10 per cent of an average adult body – then they would lose as much heat through that as their exposed head.

Parents are often advised to keep children's heads covered to stop them getting cold, but this isn't to do with any special heat-losing properties of the head. It has more to do with the relative size of the head to the body. At birth, a baby's head makes up over 20 per cent of their total surface area, so exposing that skin leads to increased heat loss, putting them at risk of hypothermia much quicker than an adult, if they were to both have their heads uncovered.

Risk factors for hypothermia

Factors that may increase a person's susceptibility to hypothermia include:

- **Children** – small children are at risk of hypothermia because they are unable to protect themselves in varied environmental conditions. They also have a faster rate of heat loss than adults, generally speaking. Due to their large head relative to their body, they also need their heads covered to prevent significant heat loss.
- **Old age** – in the elderly, the ability to notice changes in temperature is impaired due to the loss of nerve endings to the skin. They also have less fat, which has an insulating function, and a lower metabolic rate, and so generate less heat themselves. Social factors also play a part, as the elderly are more likely to be reluctant to use heating for economic reasons, and they may be socially isolated so can be alone for long periods of time with no one noticing as they deteriorate.
- **Dementia or immobilising illness** – anybody who is unable to look after themselves independently, either physically or cognitively, is at risk of hypothermia. People with dementia can be particularly at risk if they wander off in cold conditions without having protected themselves with appropriate clothing first.
- **Alcohol and other drugs** – alcohol makes people feel cosy because it relaxes the blood vessels, allowing more blood to flow near the skin, providing a flushed appearance and a warm sensation. This also puts people who are drunk at significant risk of hypothermia if they are outside in cold weather, as this increases the rate of heat loss. It also slows down the metabolism, so slows down internal heat generation. Alcohol also impairs judgement, so the person is less likely to recognise the environment and their own physical condition, and less likely to take protective measures against heat loss. This is also a concern with any other mind-altering substance.
- **Water immersion** – people who spend any time immersed in water that is colder than body temperature will suffer significant heat loss. The other person at risk is anyone who may have been in wet clothes for a prolonged period of time, either due to incontinence or sweating.

Severe hypothermia is life-threatening

Mild hypothermia (32–35 °C body temperature) is usually easy to treat. However, the risk of death increases as the core body temperature drops below 32 °C.

If core body temperature is lower than 28 °C, the condition is life-threatening without immediate medical attention. Under this temperature, a person will be very cold to touch, unresponsive, rigid, not breathing, have no pulse, and their pupils will be fixed (they will not respond to light changes). They will appear to be dead, but they may not be.

First aid for severe hypothermia

First aid steps for severe hypothermia include:

- **In an emergency, call triple zero (000).**
- While waiting for help to arrive, monitor the person's breathing. If they have severe hypothermia, their breathing may become dangerously slow or shallow, or they may cease breathing.
- Begin cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) immediately if the person shows no signs of life – if they are not breathing normally, are unconscious or unresponsive, or not moving.

Never assume a person is dead. A person with severe hypothermia may only take one breath per minute, with a heart rate of less than 20 beats per minute. Always assume they are alive.

First aid for all cases of hypothermia

The first aid tips that apply to all stages of hypothermia include:

- The first step in all cases of hypothermia is to prevent any further heat loss. This is done by removing the four ways that heat loss occurs mentioned earlier, including:
 - Conduction – remove the person from a cold surface if possible. Ideally, place them onto a warm surface, or at least a dry one that will prevent further heat loss.
 - Convection – remove the person from a windy or wet environment. Covering with blankets is good, but the aim must be to get them to shelter.
 - Radiation – Cover as much of the person as possible to avoid radiant heat loss. Particularly cover the head of a younger child.
 - Evaporation – wet and sweaty people will suffer evaporative heat loss. Dry skin where possible and remove wet clothing as soon as practicable.
- Don't massage or rub the person – and do not allow them to help you. Keep them still because, particularly below 32 °C, they risk a cardiac arrest.
- Move the person out of the cold – if this is not possible, protect them from wind, cover their head and insulate their body from the cold ground. If the person is moderately or severely hypothermic, move them as gently as possible. Below approximately 30 °C the heart is very vulnerable and there are case studies of simple movements like rolling the person over prompting a cardiac arrest.
- Remove wet clothing – replace with a dry covering, preferably warm. Cover the person's head.
- Try to warm the person – do not use hot water immersion. Make sure that the person is dry. Insulate them from the environment to retain whatever heat they are producing. Use whatever heat source is available – heaters, hot water bottles, heat packs, an electric blanket – to begin slowly warming the person. The heat source should not be too hot or too close to the person. A slow and gradual warming is ideal and whatever heat source is used only has to be warmer than the person to be donating heat. When applying heat close to the skin – such as with hot water bottles or heat packs – be careful not to make them too hot, as the

person may have impaired sensation to their skin and is at risk of suffering burns. If using multiple small sources of heat, such as heat packs, preferentially pack them around the torso, into armpits and the groin to focus warming on the central area. Share body heat – to warm the person’s body, remove your clothing and lie next to the person, making skin-to-skin contact. Then cover both bodies with a blanket or get into a sleeping bag if possible.

- Don’t give alcohol – it lowers the body’s ability to retain heat. If the person is alert and is able to swallow, have them drink warm, non-alcoholic beverages. Do not offer liquids if they are vomiting.
- Do not leave the person alone – stay with them at all times.
- Continually monitor breathing – if the person’s breathing stops, start cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) immediately if you are trained. If unsure, dial triple zero (000) – operators will advise you what to do. Continue CPR until the person starts breathing on their own or until medical help arrives.
- Don’t assume the person is dead – CPR can be lifesaving for a person with severe hypothermia who may appear to be dead. They may not be breathing, have no pulse, be cold to touch, have fixed pupils and be rigid – but they may still be alive.

Preventing hypothermia when outdoors

Exposure to cold weather, even for a short time, can be dangerous if you are not prepared. Shivering and feeling cold or numb are warning signs that the body is losing too much heat.

Simple ways to prevent hypothermia include:

- Avoid prolonged exposure to cold weather.
- Be alert to weather conditions that may increase the risk of hypothermia and act accordingly. For example, seek shelter during a snowstorm.
- If driving through a cold weather environment, particularly if there is a risk of ice or snow on the road increasing the chances of a crash, do not rely on the vehicle heater to stay warm while driving. Dress for the weather outside the car and leave the heater turned down so that in the event that you are incapacitated by an accident or snowstorm, you have a better chance of avoiding hypothermia.
- Wear several layers of clothing to trap body heat, rather than just one bulky layer. Natural fibres like wool are better at holding heat.
- Use a weatherproof outer layer to stay dry.
- Use gloves, scarves and socks, with spares to replace when wet.
- Wear insulated boots.
- Wear warm headgear.
- Make sure your clothes and boots aren’t too tight. If your blood circulation is restricted, you are more prone to hypothermia.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Eat regularly.
- Take regular breaks to reduce the risk of physical fatigue.
- Keep your eye on exact body temperature by taking a clinical thermometer in your first aid kit.
- Change out of wet clothes straight away.
- Avoid alcohol, cigarettes and caffeine.
- Make sure your kit includes a good supply of waterproof matches.

Use a buddy system

When participating in any outdoor activity that has the potential risk of hypothermia, such as bushwalking or mountaineering, use the ‘buddy system’ and check each other for warning signs. You may not be able to recognise your own symptoms of hypothermia due to mental confusion. First aid training is strongly advised.

Hypothermia at home

Hypothermia can occur in the home. The elderly and some people with medical conditions are more susceptible to hypothermia. The risk can be reduced by:

- making sure there is adequate heat in the home
- seeking assistance from government agencies for help with heating, food and clothing if necessary
- having regular medical check-ups.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Your doctor
- The emergency department of your nearest hospital

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[Bushfire smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas, and may affect people's health...](#)

- [Emergencies - floods](#)

[You and your family should work out an emergency plan in case of flood...](#)

- [Smoke from planned burns](#)

[Bushfire smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas, and may affect people's health. Planned burns are an important part of reducing the risk of bushfires...](#)

- [Talking to children about bushfire risk](#)

[Children can be affected by information regarding bushfire risk and they may become concerned about issues of safety. Talking to children openly in a way that suits their age, while also involving...](#)

- [Urban flash floods - FAQs](#)

[Urban flash flooding can happen quickly and without warning. Heavy rain causes runoff to collect in dips, car parks and roads, and there is a risk of contamination, injury and disease...](#)

Work and environmental safety

- [Asbestos and your health](#)

[When asbestos fibres become airborne, people working with asbestos may inhale particles which remain in their lungs...](#)

- [Cadmium](#)

[Low-level exposure to cadmium over a long period of time may cause health effects because cadmium can accumulate in the body...](#)

- [Computer-related injuries](#)

[Using a computer can contribute to problems of the muscles and joints, eyestrain and overuse injuries of the arms, wrists and hands...](#)

- [Eye safety at work](#)

[Wearing eye protection appropriate for the task can significantly reduce the risk of injury...](#)

- [Ladder safety matters – Mick \(video\)](#)

[Stop and think before you use a ladder...](#)

- [Ladder safety matters – Nick \(video\)](#)

[Stop and think before you use a ladder...](#)

- [Ladders Safety Matters - Paul \(video\)](#)

[We can keep our pools safe, healthy, and most importantly fun...](#)

- [Look after your health at harvest time \(slideshow\)](#)

[Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness...](#)

- [Q fever](#)

[Q fever is caused by a micro-organism that can be carried by cattle, sheep and goats...](#)

- [Shiftwork](#)

[A person working the night shift is at greater risk of various disorders and accidents...](#)

- [Skin cancer - protecting outdoor workers](#)

[People who work outdoors are in one of the highest risk groups for skin cancer...](#)

- [Workplace conflict](#)

[A clash of personalities at work is bad for business, because it can affect productivity and increase absenteeism...](#)

- [Workplace safety - confined spaces](#)

[Around 60 per cent of people killed in confined spaces were trying to rescue someone else...](#)

- [Workplace safety - coping with a critical incident](#)

[Stress responses can develop over time after trauma, and support may be required by some workers or groups...](#)

- [Workplace safety - dangerous goods](#)

[Dangerous goods are objects or substances that are potentially harmful to people or the environment, such as explosives or chemicals...](#)

- [Workplace safety - infection control](#)

[The spread of many pathogens in the workplace can be prevented with regular hand washing...](#)

- [Workplace safety - manual handling injuries](#)

[A person can be injured when handling objects in a variety of ways including pulling, pushing, holding or restraining...](#)

- [Workplace safety - noise pollution](#)

[There are many ways to reduce exposure to excessive noise in the workplace...](#)

- [Workplace safety - overuse injuries](#)

[Occupational overuse syndrome, also known as RSI, is caused by repetitive movements or awkward postures...](#)

- [Work-related fatalities](#)

[In 2013, 196 people lost their lives due to work-related accidents in Australia. Find out more about your industry and which organisations help to prevent work-related deaths in your workplace...](#)

Farm safety

- [Chemicals and spray drift](#)

[Sprayed chemicals can drift over neighbouring properties or water sources, and can affect human health, animals or the environment...](#)

- [Farm safety and handling agrichemicals](#)

[To reduce risks on the farm, use hazardous chemicals according to manufacturer guidelines or replace them with less dangerous options...](#)

- [Farm safety – children](#)

[Children who live on farms are at greater risk of injury and death than their parents or other farm workers...](#)

- [Farm safety - confined spaces](#)

[Any confined space on a farm can be dangerous and the threat may not be apparent until it's too late...](#)

- [Farm safety - crush injuries](#)

[Hand and finger injuries are the most common crush injuries that occur on Victorian farms...](#)

- [Farm safety - falls](#)

[Falls are a common farm hazard, especially for older farmers...](#)

- [Farm safety - handling animals](#)

[Any animal-handling practices can increase the risk of injury to farmers, farm workers and the animal...](#)

- [Farm safety - machinery](#)

[Poorly used or faulty machinery is a major cause of death and injury on farms...](#)

- [Farm safety - manual handling](#)

[Farm workers often experience muscle and ligament strain, but good manual handling techniques and safe work habits can prevent most injuries...](#)

- [Farm safety - quad bikes](#)

[Most injuries and deaths involving quad bikes \(all-terrain vehicles\) are caused by the bike rolling over the rider...](#)

- [Farm safety - risks and hazards](#)

[Farms can be dangerous places for workers and family members, but the risks can be reduced...](#)

- [Farm safety – sheep and shearing](#)

[Handling sheep can cause manual injuries and badly designed shearing sheds can present a range of hazards...](#)

- [Look after your health at harvest time \(slideshow\)](#)

[Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness..](#)

Related Information

- [Heat stress and heat-related illness](#)
Heat kills more Australians than any natural disaster. Find out how you can treat and prevent heat-related illness...
- [Heat stress and older people](#)
People aged 65 years and over are at increased risk of heat-related illnesses and need special care in hot weather...
- [Heat stress – preventing heatstroke](#)
Heatstroke is a life-threatening emergency that can be avoided by following simple prevention measures...
- [Snow sports and cold-related injuries](#)
You can help reduce your risk of winter sports injuries with planning, preparation and proper equipment...
- [Hot weather and child safety](#)
Babies and children can quickly lose body fluids in hot weather, which can lead to dehydration...

[Home](#)

Related information on other websites

- [Mayo Clinic Online - Hypothermia](#)
- [National Health Service Direct UK](#)

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