



SOUTHWEST PUBLIC HEALTH DISTRICT

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Public Health: During extreme cold weather, guard against hypothermia

The elderly and babies who sleep in unheated rooms are among those who face the greatest danger during cold snaps, but others are at risk as well, says Southwest Health District Health Director Dr. Jacqueline Grant.

“When you are exposed to cold weather, your body begins to lose heat faster than it can be produced,” Grant explained. “Prolonged exposure to cold will eventually drain your body’s stored energy. The result is hypothermia, or abnormally low body temperature. While we don’t see it in Southwest Georgia as often as people in more northern areas, it can happen here, especially when temperatures fall below freezing.”

The elderly, especially those with inadequate food, clothing or heating, are among the most vulnerable to hyperthermia, she said. Infants sleeping in cold bedrooms are also susceptible to the condition. Others at risk include the homeless, people who spend a lot of time outdoors and individuals who drink alcohol or use drugs, she said.

Power outages during cold weather pose public health concerns as well. “People may try to warm up by using generators without appropriate safeguards to protect them from carbon monoxide,” Grant said. “They may use grills designed for outdoor use indoors for heat, and that is a fire hazard. People who don’t often use their wood-burning stoves or fireplaces may have blocked chimneys or other barriers that could cause smoke to back up or fire to spread inside. If you plan to use a wood stove, fireplace or space heater, be extremely careful and follow the manufacturer’s instructions.”

Other ways to stay safe during extremely cold weather include dressing warmly and in layers, staying dry, avoiding alcohol and eating well-balanced meals.

Symptoms of hypothermia in adults include shivering, exhaustion, confusion, fumbling, memory loss, slurred speech and drowsiness. Infants with hypothermia develop bright red, cold skin and are sluggish.

For more information, go to www.southwestgeorgiapublichealth.org or contact your local health department.

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