



Winter Storms

Information for the Public

What is extreme cold?

What constitutes extreme cold and its effects can vary across different areas of the country. In regions relatively unaccustomed to winter weather, near freezing temperatures are considered “extreme cold.” Extreme cold is a dangerous situation that can bring on health emergencies for high risk people, such as the homeless or people who live in a home that is poorly insulated or without heat, and those who are stranded.

What health risks are associated with extreme cold?

- Each year, dozens of Americans die from exposure to cold. Add to that number vehicle accidents and fatalities, fires due to dangerous use of heaters and other winter weather fatalities and you have a significant threat.
- Extremely cold temperatures, heavy snow and coastal flooding can cause hazardous conditions.
- Space heaters and fireplaces increase the risk of household fires and carbon monoxide poisoning.
- Exposure to cold temperatures can cause other serious health problems.
- When temperatures drop below normal, heat can leave your body more rapidly.
- Threats, such as hypothermia and frostbite, can lead to loss of fingers and toes or cause permanent kidney, pancreas and liver injury and even death.

What risks are associated with winter storms?

- A major winter storm can last for several days with high winds, freezing rain or sleet, heavy snowfall and cold temperatures.
- People can become trapped at home or in a car without utilities or other assistance.
- Attempting to walk for help in a winter storm can be a deadly decision.
- The aftermath of a winter storm can have an impact on a community or region for days, weeks or even months.
- Extremely cold temperatures, heavy snow and flooding can cause hazardous conditions.
- You may have to cope with power failures and icy roads.
- Space heaters and fireplaces increase the risk of household fires and carbon monoxide poisoning.

Why should you prepare for winter storms?

Taking preventive action is your best defense against having to deal with extreme cold weather conditions. By preparing your home and car in advance for winter emergencies, and by taking

safety precautions during times of extremely cold weather, you can reduce the risk of weather-related health problems.

Why is heavy snow dangerous?

Heavy snow can immobilize a region and paralyze a city, stranding commuters, and closing airports, stopping the flow of supplies, and disrupting emergency and medical services. Accumulations of snow can cause roofs to collapse and knock down trees and power lines. Homes and farms may be isolated for days and unprotected livestock may be lost. The cost of snow removal, repairing damages, and the loss of business can have severe economic impacts on cities and towns.

What is wind chill?

One of the gravest dangers of winter weather is wind chill. The wind chill is based on the rate of heat loss from exposed skin by combined effects of wind and cold. As the wind increases, heat is carried away from the body at an accelerated rate, driving down the body temperature. Animals are also affected by wind chill.

What are winter weather advisories?

Winter weather advisories are issued when conditions are expected to cause significant inconveniences and may be hazardous. If you are cautious, these situations should not be life threatening.

What is a winter storm watch?

A winter storm watch alerts the public to the possibility of a blizzard, heavy snow, heavy freezing rain, or heavy sleet. Winter storm watches are usually issued 12 to 48 hours before the beginning of a winter storm. Prepare now!

What is a winter storm warning?

A winter storm warning is issued when hazardous winter weather in the form of heavy snow, heavy freezing rain, or heavy sleet is imminent or occurring. Winter Storm warnings are usually issued 12 to 24 hours before the event is expected to begin. Act now!

What is frostbite?

Frostbite is damage to body tissue caused by extreme cold. A wind chill of -20° Fahrenheit will cause frostbite in just 30 minutes. Frostbite causes a loss of feeling and a white or pale appearance in extremities, such as fingers, toes, ear lobes or the tip of the nose. If symptoms are detected, get medical help immediately! If you have to wait for help, slowly rewarm affected areas. However, if the person is also showing signs of hypothermia, warm the body core before the extremities.

What is hypothermia?

Hypothermia is a condition brought on when the body temperature drops to less than 95°F. It can kill. For those who survive, there are likely to be lasting kidney, liver and pancreas problems. Warning signs include uncontrollable shivering, memory loss, disorientation, incoherence, slurred speech, drowsiness and apparent exhaustion. Take the person's temperature. If below 95°F, seek medical care immediately!

What should you do to prepare for a winter storm?

- Dress in several layers of lightweight clothing, wear mittens and a hat (preferably one that covers your ears).
- Wear waterproof, insulated boots to keep your feet warm and dry and to maintain your footing in ice and snow.
- Minimize travel. If travel is necessary, keep a disaster supplies kit in your vehicle.
- Listen to a NOAA Weather Radio or other local news channels for critical information from the National Weather Service (NWS).
- Winterize your vehicle and keep the gas tank full. A full tank will keep the fuel line from freezing.
- Insulate your home by installing storm windows or covering windows with plastic from the inside to keep cold air out.
- Maintain heating equipment and chimneys by having them cleaned and inspected every year.
- Bring pets/companion animals inside during winter weather. Move other animals or livestock to sheltered areas with non-frozen drinking water.
- Running water, even at a trickle, helps prevent pipes from freezing.
- All fuel-burning equipment should be vented to the outside and kept clear.

What should you do after the storm?

- Go to a designated public shelter if your home loses power or heat during periods of extreme cold.
- Avoid driving when conditions include sleet, freezing rain or drizzle, snow or dense fog.
- Before tackling strenuous tasks in cold temperatures, consider your physical condition, the weather factors and the nature of the task.
- Protect yourself from frostbite and hypothermia by wearing warm, loose-fitting, lightweight clothing in several layers. Stay indoors, if possible.
- Help people who require special assistance such as elderly people living alone, people with disabilities and children.
- Check on your animals and make sure that their access to food and water is not blocked by snow drifts, ice or other obstacles. If possible, bring them indoors.

What supplies will you need?

- Water—at least a 3-day supply; one gallon per person per day.
- Food—at least a 3-day supply of nonperishable, easy-to-prepare food.

- Flashlight.
- Battery-powered or hand-crank radio (NOAA Weather Radio, if possible)
- Extra batteries.
- First aid kit.
- Medications (7-day supply) and medical items (hearing aids with extra batteries, glasses, contact lenses, syringes, cane).
- Sanitation and personal hygiene items.
- Copies of personal documents (medication list and pertinent medical information, proof of address, deed/lease to home, passports, birth certificates, insurance policies.
- Cell phone with chargers.
- Family and emergency contact information.
- Extra cash.
- Baby supplies (bottles, formula, baby food, diapers).
- Pet supplies (collar, leash, ID, food, carrier, bowl).
- Tools/supplies for securing your home.
- Sand, rock salt or non-clumping kitty litter to make walkways and steps less slippery.
- Warm coats, gloves or mittens, hats, boots and extra blankets and warm clothing for all household members and alternative heating methods such as fireplaces, wood or coal-burning stoves.