

Winter Weather: Indoor Safety

Staying warm and safe can be a challenge during the winter months. Extremely cold temperatures and power failures can accompany winter storms. Staying indoors may be the best way to keep warm however there are indoor hazards to be aware of. In addition exposure to cold temperatures, whether indoors or outdoors, can cause serious or life-threatening health problems. For more information, refer to Extreme Cold fact sheet.

Populations at risk

When the weather gets cold, infants and the elderly are particularly at risk but anyone can be affected:

- Children and infants (under 1 year), lose body heat more easily than adults and cannot make enough body heat by shivering. Whereas the elderly make less heat because of a slower metabolism.¹
- People living in homes that are poorly insulated or without heat;
- People living in homes without power (usually due to other weather-related events such as a winter storm);

Provide warm clothing for infants. Try to maintain a warm indoor temperature. If the temperature cannot be maintained within the home, make temporary arrangements to stay elsewhere if possible.

Assisting those in need

When it is safe to do so, you can:

- visit, telephone or check in on them regularly.
- ensure they have warm clothing, basic necessities and a safe way to stay warm.
- take them to warm locations such as local libraries or shopping malls.

Keep your home safe

- Use a fireplace, wood stove, or other combustion heater only if they are properly vented to the outside and have a smoke detector installed. Ensure these appliances display the certification mark from Canadian Standards Association (CSA) or Underwriters Laboratories of Canada (ULC)
- Ensure adequate ventilation if a kerosene heater is used. Use only the type of fuel your heater is designed to use—do not substitute.
- Do not place a space heater within 3 feet of anything that may catch on fire, such as drapes, furniture, or bedding. Never cover a space heater or place it on top of furniture or near water. Do not run the cord under carpets or rugs.
- Avoid using extension cords to plug in your space heater. This may create a fire hazard.

¹,Centers for Disease Control, “Extreme Cold – A Prevention Guide to Promote Your Personal Health and Safety,” pg 6.

- As a precaution, store a multi-purpose, dry-chemical fire extinguisher near the area to be heated.
- Protect yourself from carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning by installing a battery-operated CO detector. Ensure the CO detector displays the certification mark from Canadian Standards Association (CSA) or Underwriters Laboratories of Canada (ULC)
- Never use an electric generator, charcoal or gas grill or camp stove in the home, garage, or near the air intake of your house. This increases the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. For more information, refer to Carbon Monoxide Poisoning fact sheet.
- Do not use the generator or appliances if they are wet, this will increase your risk of electrocution.
- Do not store gasoline indoors where the fumes could ignite.

If there is a power failure:

- It is recommended to use battery-powered flashlights or lanterns rather than candles.
- If candles are used, never leave lit candles unattended.

Keep a potable water supply

Extreme cold can cause water pipes in your home to freeze and sometimes rupture. When very cold temperatures are expected:

- Keep the indoor temperature warm.
- Improve the circulation of heated air around water pipes. You can open your kitchen cabinet doors beneath the kitchen sink. Or insulate any water lines that run along outer walls.

If your pipes do freeze, do not attempt to thaw them with a torch. Instead, thaw them slowly by directing the warm air from an electric hair dryer onto the pipes. If you cannot thaw your pipes, or the pipes ruptured, use an alternative source such as bottled water.

Eat and Drink Wisely

Eating well-balanced meals will help you stay warm. Refrain from drinking alcoholic or caffeinated beverages. They cause your body to lose heat more rapidly. As an alternative, drink warm beverages or broth to help maintain your body temperature. If you have any dietary restrictions, speak to your doctor

For More Information

To speak with a public health professional or for more information call Your Health Connection at 721-7520 (1-877-721-750) or visit the following websites:

Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit: www.simcoemuskokahealth.org

Extreme Cold Fact Sheet

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Fact Sheet

Centers for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov

Environment Canada: <http://www.ec.gc.ca/>