Hypothermia and Seniors Staying Warm during Cold Winter Months

In most parts of the country, a 60-degree day would hardly count as a cold snap. And yet if a senior citizen lives in a poorly insulated house and keeps the heater off to save money, such a day might be chilly enough to cause a hazardous drop in body temperature. As people get older, their bodies become a little less efficient at regulating heat. And if the body temperature dips below 94 degrees, hypothermia sets in: The person becomes confused, speech is slow and slurred, the pulse weakens, movements become clumsy, and the body often shivers uncontrollably (although some people don't shiver at all). Mainly, this happens because their heart rates have slowed, blood vessels no longer contract as well, and muscle tone and body fat have been lost.

The risk of developing hypothermia also increases among senior citizens that have under active thyroids, suffer from diabetes or heart disease, or take certain prescribed medications. Medications that can increase an older person's risk for hypothermia include drugs that are used to treat anxiety, depression or nausea, and even some over-the-counter cold remedies. And all this can happen on a day when most people don't even bother to wear a coat.

Hypothermia symptoms usually begin slowly. As you develop hypothermia, your ability to think and move often becomes clouded. In fact, you may even be unaware that you need help. As your thought process is impaired, you fail to realize that you are becoming colder.

As the colder months approach we all need to be aware of the warning signs of hypothermia, and of ways to prevent hypothermia from occurring. Changes in a person’s behavior may indicate that the cold is affecting how well their muscles and nerves work. It is best to watch for the "umbles"-stumbles, mumbles, fumbles, and grumbles.

**Symptoms may include:**

- Confusion, forgetfulness, or drowsiness
- Difficulty speaking
- Shivering- although elderly adults may not have this symptom
- Slow breathing
- Clumsiness or stiff muscles
- Unusual irritability
What to do if you suspect hypothermia:

If you suspect someone is suffering from the cold, and have a thermometer available take their temperature and if it is 96 degrees or below, call 911. While waiting for help the best step to take to warm a person slowly wrapping them in a blanket, towel or whatever is handy. DO NOT put them in a hot bath or shower or offer alcohol. Do not rub any part of their body since their skin may be fragile. You can also use your own body heat by getting closer to the person.

To prevent hypothermia:

- Make sure the person is keeping their home warm enough and not set too long at a low temperature in efforts to reduce their heating bill. The thermostat should be set at least 68 degrees to 70 degrees. Even mildly cool homes with temperatures from 60 to 65 degrees can cause mild hypothermia especially in the elderly.

- Make sure they maintain humidity in the home. Use a humidifier, or place pans of water on the stove or radiator.

- Weatherize the home by closing off gaps with insulation and caulking.

- Make sure to keep the neck, head, and hands covered at all times during cold weather.

- Drink plenty of fluids, and avoid alcohol and nicotine.

- Follow a healthy diet. Older individuals burn calories more in the winter due to the body having to create more body heat.

- Encourage the person to exercise as their age and health allows because exercise will promote appetite and make more body heat.

- Wear several layers of clothes rather than a single, thick layer

Don’t forget that you need to stay warm when it’s cold outside. Remember that this means knowing if weather forecasts are for very cold temperatures or for windy and cold weather. You lose more body heat on a windy day than a calm day. Homes or apartments that are not heated enough, even with a temperature of 60° F to 65° F, can lead to illness. This is a special problem if you live alone because there is no one else to comment on the chilliness of the house or to notice if you are having symptoms of hypothermia. Set your thermostat for at least 68° F to 70° F. If a power outage leaves you without heat, try to stay with a relative or friend.