

## **January 2017 Health Notes by Evelyn Ames    Cold Weather: How it Affects Your Health**

Winter has arrived! Although the days begin to get longer, the cold is here with us for a few months! A study covering 384 locations in 13 countries, including the United States, published in *Lancet*, found that cold weather is responsible, directly or indirectly, for 20 times more deaths than hot weather. As temperatures drop, there is an increase in the number of health risks, particularly for older adults. The areas of the body especially at risk include the immune system, cardio-vascular system, the skin, and body balance.

**Immune System:** We spend more time inside (homes, stores, restaurants) and in close contact with others, making us vulnerable to the common cold (caused by over 100 different rhino viruses), influenza, bronchitis, sinus infections and other upper respiratory illnesses. The best suggestions for reducing the chance of acquiring such infections is to wash hands frequently with soap and water, cover cough and sneeze in the crook of one's elbow, get a flu shot, and get some fresh air!

**Cardio-vascular system (the heart):** Cold weather acts as a vasoconstrictor and narrows blood vessels. The body reduces circulation to the extremities and skin surface (peripheral vasoconstriction). This concentrates a greater volume of blood in the body core, which in turn increases arterial blood pressure. Suggestions for reducing the heart risk are to dress warmly (hat, gloves, coat, layering clothing) and forego strenuous outdoor activity. The American Heart Association recommends avoiding sudden exertion like lifting a heavy shovel full of snow or walking through heavy, wet snow/snow drifts. Give oneself a break from outdoor physical activity and avoid drinking alcohol before and immediately after shoveling. Why? Alcohol increases a person's sensation of warmth and leads to underestimating the extra strain when doing physical activity in the cold. **Heart attacks** increase in frequency during the winter months, usually affecting those who already have an underlying health problem. A drop in temperature increases blood pressure. This places more strain on the heart, with the body working harder to generate additional heat when it is cold.

**Temperature:** Older adults are at risk for hypothermia. Cold temperatures, high winds, snow and rain can steal body heat. At 30 degrees Fahrenheit in a 30-mile per hour wind, the cooling effect is equal to 15 degrees Fahrenheit. Hypothermia means the body temperature has fallen below 35 degrees Celsius or about 95 degrees Fahrenheit. This occurs when the body can't produce enough energy to keep the internal body temperature warm enough. The body lets one know this is happening with plenty of warning from shivering, numb extremities, reduced dexterity and just feeling miserably cold. Symptoms include lack of coordination, mental confusion, slowed reactions, shivering and sleepiness. Elderly people who have a lower subcutaneous fat level may have a diminished ability to sense temperature, meaning they can suffer hypothermia without knowing they're in danger. Keep warm by wearing layers of clothing. This traps air between layers, forming a protective insulation. Keep hands and feet warm, as they tend to lose heat rapidly. Heat can be lost through the head so wear a hat or head scarf. Ears are especially prone to frostbite.

**Balance:** Sidewalks, parking lots, steps and stairs can be icy and very slippery. One of the most important preventive acts is to wear shoes or boots that are meant to be worn in snow/icy conditions. Take the time to change shoes when going outside to take out garbage or pick up newspaper. Enjoy walking in snow in icy conditions? Consider wearing Yaktrax Pro.

**Skin:** Dry winter air can suck the moisture from your skin. Suggestions for caring for skin: use a moisturizer with an oil base to block evaporation. Shower in lukewarm—not hot—water. Use a humidifier to replenish moisture to the skin's top layer.

**On the flip side of risks,** there are benefits of cold weather: no pollen from plants and no biting insects. More calories are burned to keep warm. Suggestions for coping with cold weather: eat hearty stews and soups and comfort foods to give you the fuel to cope with cold weather. This is not summer time and salad weather!

<http://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/how-does-cold-weather-affect-your-health>  
Amer Heart Assn [http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/General/Cold-Weather-and-Cardiovascular-Disease\\_UCM\\_315615\\_Article.jsp#](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/General/Cold-Weather-and-Cardiovascular-Disease_UCM_315615_Article.jsp#)  
<http://www.coolantarctica.com/Antarctica%20fact%20file/science/cold-weather-health.php>  
<http://www.nytimes.com/column/personal-health> (Brody, Dec. 19, 2016)