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THE WINTER DANGER OF HYPOTHERMIA

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Winter is close at hand and many of us will be venturing outside to enjoy Montana as we ski, snowshoe, sled, skate, hunt, and snowmobile. Awareness of the signs and symptoms of hypothermia and how to deal with this potentially deadly condition is an important tool to utilize to bring us back safely from our winter adventures.

Our bodies' temperatures are normally regulated within a very narrow range, between 97.2 and 99.5 degrees. When our temperature drops below this level, we are at risk of organ damage and even death.

Hypothermia is most likely to occur when we are exposed to cold environments for long periods of time without adequate protection. Becoming wet from rain, snow, or even sweat greatly increases the risk, as does exposure to windy conditions. If a person is injured and unable to move, their risk of hypothermia also greatly increases.

Symptoms of hypothermia usually begin gradually; recognizing them early and intervening before they become severe can be life-saving. The first symptom is simply feeling cold, followed by shivering as the affected person's body attempts to generate increased heat.

If measures are not taken at this point to warm the individual, more severe symptoms can develop, including fatigue, drowsiness, and confusion. The hypothermic person becomes incapable of making rational decisions to correct the situation and is at high risk of dying. Further symptom progression will include loss of coordination, muscle stiffness, and slowed breathing and heart rate followed by coma and death.

The best approach to hypothermia is to prevent it. Measures to do so include:

- Dress appropriately for your winter activity and have extra clothing available. These should include adequate insulating layers, protection from moisture, and warm head, hand, and foot protection.

- Consider carrying space blankets or even a sleeping bag on longer day trips.
- Carry matches and fire starters with you and know how to use them to build a fire in winter conditions.
- Stay hydrated with non-alcoholic fluids.
- Avoid overextending yourself or others in your party.
- Pay attention to your companions, watching for early signs of hypothermia and deal with them early and aggressively.

If hypothermia does occur, treatment should include the following:

- Remove cold, wet clothing and replace with warm, dry garments.
- If the situation allows it, build a fire to provide a heat source.
- Wrap the person in blankets or place in a sleeping bag to retain heat. Insulate them from the ground and protect from wind. If possible, another individual may share the sleeping bag.
- Provide warm liquids if the individual is alert and capable of drinking. Alcohol should be avoided!
- Place heat sources such as warm water bottles or heat packs around the victim to provide warmth. These will especially help if placed in the arm pits and groin areas, close to major arteries.
- Move to a warm place as quickly as possible but do not delay initiating treatment in the field as soon as symptoms appear.
- Call 911 if the victim's symptoms are progressive and emergency care is available. Severe hypothermia requires specialized care in a hospital to prevent complications and death.

We are fortunate to live in a place with an abundance of exciting winter activities. Knowledge regarding hypothermia and its prevention and treatment will help to keep you safe this winter.



Facts About Hearing Loss

By: Lynn Harris
AuD, CCC, SP/A

Approximately 36 million Americans suffer from hearing loss.

- More than half of the people with hearing loss are younger than age 65.
- Untreated hearing loss can affect your ability to understand speech and can negatively impact your social and emotional well-being—hearing impairment can decrease your quality of life!
- Hearing loss is the third most common health problem in the United States.

Signs you may have a hearing loss

- Difficulty hearing people talk in noisy environments such as a restaurant, shopping mall, in a car, or at the movie theater.
- People seem to “mumble” all the time.
- Family, friends, or colleagues often have to repeat themselves when speaking with you.
- You have trouble hearing people when they are not facing you or are in another room.
- You have trouble following conversations.
- You have ringing, buzzing, or hissing sounds in your ears.

What causes hearing loss?

- Exposure to excessive loud noise.
- Ear infections, trauma, or ear disease.
- Harm of the inner ear and ear drum from contact with a foreign object (cotton swabs, fingers, bugs).
- Illness or certain medications.
- Deteriorating hearing due to the normal aging process.

How to protect your hearing

- Wear hearing protection when around sounds louder than 85dB for a long period of time. There are different types of hearing protection such as foam earplugs, earmuffs and custom hearing protection devices. Contact your local audiologist for custom hearing protection devices.
- Turn down the volume when listening to the radio, the TV, MP3 player, or anything through ear buds and headphones.
- Walk away from the noise.
- And, other than hearing protection, do not put anything in your ear!



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