



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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For News Media Information Contact:
Vicki Monks, Public Information Officer
Oklahoma City-County Health Department
Office: (405) 425-4386
Cell: (405) 520-9902

Health Precautions Related to Cold Weather and Power Loss

Gusty northern winds combined with plummeting temperatures can create dangerous situations for anyone who isn't prepared. That's why it's important to make sure that you and your vehicle are outfitted properly for extreme cold before heading out the door, says Oklahoma City County Health Department (OCCHD) Director Gary Cox. "It's important to realize just how quickly frostbite and hypothermia can set in when the wind chill dips below zero," Cox says.

The Oklahoma City-County Health Department offers the following recommendations for cold weather situations.

Extreme Cold Exposure

Prolonged exposure to the cold can cause frostbite, hypothermia, or in extreme cases, death. Infants and the elderly are most susceptible to extreme cold. Frostbite occurs when the skin becomes cold enough to actually freeze. A loss of feeling and a white or pale appearance in extremities, such as fingers, toes, ear lobes, or the nose are symptoms of frostbite. Hypothermia (low body temperature) can occur during longer periods of exposure when the body temperature drops below 95 F. A person will become disoriented, confused, and shiver uncontrollably, eventually leading to drowsiness and apparent exhaustion. In severe cases, death is possible. The following tips can help decrease the risk of cold exposure:

- **Wear layered clothing outdoors** for better protection from the cold. Wear a cap to prevent rapid heat loss from an uncovered head. Cover exposed skin to prevent frostbite.
- **While indoors, try to keep at least one room heated to 70 F.** This is especially important for the elderly and small children to prevent hypothermia.
- **Sleep warm with extra blankets,** a warm cap, socks and layered clothing.
- **Avoid fatigue and exhaustion** during cold weather. Overexertion, such as shoveling snow or pushing a car, can strain your heart.
- **Carry extra clothing, blankets and high energy snacks,** such as cereal or candy bars in your car for protection if car stalls. Keep the gas tank near full to prevent icing. Don't travel alone.
- **Check daily** on elderly friends, relatives and neighbors who live alone.

- **The elderly and very young should stay indoors** as much as possible. Offer to shop for elderly friends and relatives. Just like in the summer with heat, it takes some time to get acclimated to cold weather.

Outfit Your Vehicle

Make sure your vehicle is ready for the cold with adequate antifreeze, windshield washer fluid and properly inflated tires, and pack these items:

- Blankets or sleeping bags
- Extra coats, hats and gloves (an insulated jump suit is a good extra)
- Cell phone or two-way radio
- Windshield scraper and snow brush
- Flashlight with fresh/extra batteries
- Shovel
- Tow chain
- Matches or lighter
- Traction aids (bag of sand or cat litter)
- Emergency flares or reflectors
- Jumper cables
- Snacks
- Water
- Road maps

Water Safety

If you are using water that you think might not be safe to drink or prepare food, you should attempt to vigorously boil the water for at least one minute to prevent potential waterborne illnesses. Safe water would include store-bought bottled water, or uninterrupted city water.

Don't skate, slide, or sled on frozen ponds, creeks, rivers, or lakes. Although the water appears to be frozen, it may not be solid enough to support the weight of a person. Temperatures in Oklahoma are never cold enough to completely freeze recreational water.

Food Safety

Power outages present problems with food safety as well as with heating. If people at home or those in food establishments have had a loss of power for more than four hours, take the following precautions with refrigerated food products:

- Keep refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible.
- Discard any potentially hazardous foods such as meats, eggs, dairy products and leftovers that may have exceeded 41 F. When in doubt, throw it out.

- Frozen foods in a freezer can normally be kept up to 48 hours without power. Again, the 41 F rule applies. A frozen product that has thawed should not be refrozen—it should be used immediately or disposed of. Thawed foods that have not reached 41 F can be cooked and consumed.

Eat and Drink Wisely & Avoid Alcohol

Eating high-energy, well-balanced meals will help you stay warmer. Do not drink alcoholic beverages -- they cause your body to lose heat more rapidly. Instead, drink warm, sweet beverages such as hot chocolate or sweetened coffee or tea to help maintain your body temperature. If you have any dietary restrictions, ask your doctor. Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration.

Heating Safety

When temperatures fall and power goes out, the possibility of carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning rises as people try to stay warm. Invisible, odorless and tasteless, CO is a highly poisonous gas produced by the burning of fuel such as gasoline, natural gas, kerosene, charcoal or wood. Unvented or faulty gas and kerosene appliances have the greatest potential to produce dangerous levels of CO in a home. Smoldering or poorly vented fireplaces, slow-burning fuels such as charcoal and vehicle exhausts also are potential indoor hazards. Take these precautions:

- Look at the color of the flame. A hot blue flame produces less CO and more heat than a flickering yellow flame. If you see yellow flames in your furnace or stove burner, it should be adjusted so that the flame is blue.
- Don't use an unvented gas or kerosene heater in closed spaces, especially sleeping areas.
- Don't use gas appliances such as an oven, range or clothes dryer to heat your home.
- Don't burn charcoal inside a house, garage, vehicle or tent for heating or cooking, even in a fireplace.
- Look for CO exposure symptoms including headache, dizziness, weakness, sleepiness, nausea and vomiting that can progress to disorientation, coma, convulsions and death.
- If you suspect CO poisoning, open doors and windows, turn off gas appliances, and go outside for fresh air. Call 9-1-1 emergency medical services in severe cases.
- To prevent residential fires, make sure that heaters, stoves, and fireplaces are at least three feet from anything that burns. Use screens in front of fireplaces, and do not leave children alone with space heaters. Never leave candles burning when you are not at home or while you are sleeping. If a heater uses fuel like propane or

kerosene, use only that kind of fuel and add more fuel only when the heater is cool. Store all fuels outside in closed metal containers.

Sewage Issues

Because of power outages in city utilities, be aware of the potential for sewage to back up into your home. If you do experience sewage problems remember that exposure to raw sewage can cause several infectious diseases. Try to avoid direct contact with sewage, and practice good hand washing and personal hygiene following contact.

Respiratory Diseases

Respiratory disease can be a significant problem when people stay together in crowded conditions. To help prevent respiratory disease, be sure to cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, and use good personal hygiene and thorough hand-washing practices to further reduce risk of transmission.

Slips and Falls

Everyone, especially the elderly, should avoid walking on ice. A short trip to the mailbox or to retrieve the paper could result in a longer trip to the hospital if you slip and fall. In Oklahoma, the ice is often nearly invisible (black ice) so caution should be taken after precipitation.

For more information on winter weather precautions, visit this Web site:

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/guide.asp>.

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