

Winter cold brings hypothermia danger for elderly

Even though it costs a lot to heat a home this winter, elderly Oregonians should be aware that they run the risk of indoor hypothermia if they keep their homes too cool.

Ted Haskell, Oregon State University Extension energy agent in Coquille, reported that cases of hypothermia have turned up where the victim was indoors and the temperature above 60 degrees Fahrenheit. The victims were almost always elderly. He explained that hypothermia simply means that someone is so cold that his or her life is threatened.

Haskell said it's not certain if the apparent increase in hypothermia is a result of better diagnosis or the result of people keeping their homes cooler in response to rising energy costs.

Vicki Schmall, OSU Extension gerontology specialist, pointed out that hypothermia can cause skin damage, loss of portions of fingers and toes from frostbite, and damage to the brain and internal organs. Death is the most severe result when the body temperature drops below 95 degrees.

Older people are more susceptible to hypothermia because their body's "thermostat" is less efficient. They don't shiver as effectively to generate body heat and they also lose the protective layer of fat under the skin that helps keep younger people warm. The elderly may not be as aware as young people that they are becoming cold.

The elderly most likely to develop hypothermia are the chronically ill, the very old, the poor who are unable to afford enough heat, and those who do not take normal steps to keep warm.

"People who live alone are at higher risk," Schmall said, "because no one is present to recognize early symptoms such as shivering, puffy face, sluggish speech, drowsiness, mental confusion, and pale, waxy skin."

Certain drugs can impair the body's ability to regulate temperature and may also speed up the rate of heat loss. Persons who are taking antidepressants, sedatives, tranquilizers, and cardiovascular medications should ask their doctor whether the medication might affect control of body temperature.

Alcohol abusers are at risk for similar reasons. They may feel warmer because of the effects of the alcohol and therefore, tend to neglect themselves physically.

People restricted by injuries, especially head injuries, or certain health conditions, such as strokes, may not recognize symptoms of body cooling or may not be physically able to change the conditions. And because physical activity produces body heat, anyone who is forced to be sedentary through age or illness loses a defense against the cold.

Night-time accidents, when the house is often colder, can be a problem for older people who frequently get up several times during the night.

Older adults, their friends and family should be alert to conditions where hypothermia may occur. Schmall suggest, "If you know an older person who lives alone and is homebound, make a daily call to the person. Getting cold isn't just uncomfortable, it may be danger-

ous," she added. The gerontology specialist says the best preventions of hypothermia are:

- Keep the living space warm—at least 67 degrees. People who are frail may need higher temperatures.
- Wear a hat and warm socks—even in the house.
- Make sure bedding is adequately warm. Hypothermia can develop during sleep.
- Avoid prolonged exposure to cold.
- Maintain good nutrition. People who are malnourished have even fewer physical resources and energy stores to maintain body heat.

If possible, keep physically active. The Extension energy agent suggested that another way to avoid excessive costs and still maintain a safe indoor air temperature is to heat only part of the house. By concentrating sedentary activities such as reading, sewing or watching TV in one room, it is possible to heat just that room. For best results, the room that is heated should be shut off from the rest of the house. The thermostat for the central heating


system shouldn't be in that room. The warm room can be heated with a small heater, such as an electric portable heater, an electric baseboard heater, or a small vented fuel-burning heater. When using a portable heater, be sure to keep it away from foot traffic, avoid using extension cords, and keep flammable material away from the heater, Haskell cautioned.

He added that a well-weatherized home will keep elderly occupants safer from hypothermia. Well-weatherized homes cost less to heat so people living in them are better

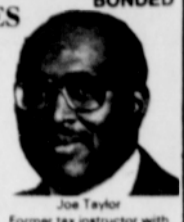
able to afford warmer temperatures. Also, most weatherization measures reduce drafts and warm up the interior surfaces of the house so the occupants stay warmer and more comfortable.

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Gospel inspiration

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Wearing a most spectacular robe of vibrant gold, Wooding opened the concert with his own unique rendition of "I'm his and he is mine." He then went on to sing, "Great Day Coming." Then he stirred the "over-flowing" crowd with his one and only version of "Get Away, Jordan."

He concluded the concert with a vibrant version of "Great Judgment Day." He has returned to Birmingham, to resume work with the international singing group, "The Moments of Inspirations," with whom he is affiliated.



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