HEALTH ALERT

Gregory Cherpes, MD
ODP Medical Director

January 26, 2026

2026 Cold Weather Alert

With the current cold weather and snow affecting much of the United States, the Office of Developmental Programs (ODP) is sending this Health Alert as a reminder to all, and particularly to CEOs and Agency Administrators of residential programs, to ensure that necessary precautions are in place to prevent cold-weather-related health risks.

In addition to the following precautions, please check that your sites' heating systems are functioning properly, that your buildings are secure, and emergency intervention/provisions are in place if needed. Confirm that vehicles are ready to transport people when necessary and that emergency backups are in place.

Foremost, the best precaution for Extreme Cold Weather is to stay indoors whenever possible.

If you need assistance with heating bills, shelter from the cold, or a warm meal, these local services can be accessed easily by:

- dialing 211
- texting your zip code to 898-211 to speak with a resource navigator for personalized help
- or by going on the **PA211 website** and entering your zip code in the search tool.

The information below is adapted from comprehensive information available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Please see the CDC website for further information: **Winter Weather: Before, During, and After**.

Exposure to the cold for too long can cause serious health problems. Hypothermia and frostbite are the most common cold-related health problems.

Please use this helpful CDC **infographic on Hypothermia & Frostbite**.

What is hypothermia? Hypothermia, or an abnormally low body temperature, is a dangerous condition that can occur when a person is exposed to extremely cold temperatures.

- Hypothermia is caused by prolonged exposures to very cold temperatures. When exposed to cold temperatures, your body begins to lose heat faster than it is produced. Lengthy exposures will eventually use up your body's stored energy, which leads to lower body temperature.
- Body temperature that is too low affects the brain, making the victim unable to think clearly or move well. This makes hypothermia especially dangerous, because a person may not know that it is happening and will not be able to do anything about it.

Warning signs of hypothermia:

Adults:

- shivering, exhaustion
- confusion, fumbling hands
- memory loss, slurred speech, drowsiness

Infants:

- bright red, cold skin

- very low energy

Don’t Wait, Take Action!

If you notice any of these signs, take the person’s temperature. **If it is below 95° F, the situation is an emergency—get medical attention immediately.**

If medical care is not immediately available, begin warming the person, as follows:

- Get the victim into a warm room or shelter.
- If the victim is wearing any wet clothing, remove it.
- Warm the center of the body first—chest, neck, head, and groin—using an electric blanket, if available. You can also use skin-to-skin contact under loose, dry layers of blankets, clothing, towels, or sheets.
- Warm beverages can help increase body temperature, but do not give alcoholic beverages. Do not try to give beverages to an unconscious person.
- After body temperature has increased, keep the person dry and wrapped in a warm blanket, including the head and neck.
- Get medical attention as soon as possible.

A person with severe hypothermia may be unconscious and may not seem to have a pulse or to be breathing. In this case, handle the victim gently, and get **emergency assistance immediately**.

- Even if the victim appears dead, CPR should be provided. CPR should continue while the victim is being warmed, until the victim responds or medical aid becomes available. In some cases, hypothermia victims who appear to be dead can be successfully resuscitated.

What is Frostbite?

Frostbite is a serious condition that's caused by exposure to extremely cold temperatures. It most often affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers, or toes. Frostbite can permanently damage the body, and severe cases can lead to a loss of the affected body part.

Recognizing Frostbite

You may be unaware of frostbite because frozen tissue is numb.

Signs of Frostbite

- Redness or pain in any skin may be the first sign of frostbite.
- An area of skin that is white or grayish-yellow
- Skin that feels unusually firm or waxy
- Numbness

You may have a greater risk of developing frostbite if you:

- Have poor blood circulation
- Are not properly dressed for extremely cold temperatures

What to Do

If you detect symptoms of frostbite, seek medical care. First determine whether the victim also shows signs of hypothermia. Hypothermia is a more serious medical condition and requires emergency medical assistance.

If there is frostbite but no sign of hypothermia and immediate medical care is not available, proceed as follows:

- Get into a warm room as soon as possible.
- Unless absolutely necessary, do not walk on frostbitten feet or toes, this increases the damage.
- Immerse the affected area in warm—not hot—water (the temperature should be comfortable to the touch, for unaffected parts of the body).
- Or warm the affected area using body heat. For example, the heat of an armpit can be used to warm frostbitten fingers.
- Do not rub the frostbitten area with snow or massage it at all. This can cause more damage.
- Don't use a heating pad, heat lamp, or the heat of a stove, fireplace, or radiator for warming. Affected areas are numb and can be easily burned.

These procedures are not substitutes for proper medical care. Hypothermia is a medical emergency, and frostbite should be evaluated by a health care provider.

Cold Weather and Travel

You don't have to travel to the arctic or high altitudes to feel the effects of cold temperatures. Learn how to avoid cold weather injuries and what to do if you find yourself in a dangerous situation due to the cold.

Most people get cold injuries because of accidents, severe unexpected weather, or poor planning. Take steps to avoid cold weather injuries.

- Wear warm clothing in several loose layers.
    - Wear a tightly woven, wind-resistant coat or jacket.
    - Wear light, inner layers of warm clothing as well as mittens, hats, and scarves.

- Make sure your equipment is appropriate for the weather, climate, and your activities.
    - In wet conditions, choose waterproof shoes that have good traction.
    - For water activities, choose an appropriately thick wet suit to prevent hypothermia.
- Use personal flotation devices. They are lifesaving if someone becomes unable to swim due to injury or the cold.
- Stay dry, your body loses heat quickly when wet.
    - Sweat and wet clothing can chill the body rapidly and increase heat loss.
    - If you're actively moving, remove extra layers of clothing whenever you feel too warm or start to sweat.
- Do not ignore shivering.
    - Shivering is an early sign that your body is losing heat.
    - Constant shivering is a sign you need to find shelter and get warm.

Travel safety

Cold Weather and Travel | Travelers' Health | CDC

Safety Guidelines: During & After a Winter Storm

Winter storms are dangerous. They can bring cold temperatures, power failures, loss of communication services, and icy roads. This can make being outside dangerous, so you should limit your time outside. Although staying indoors as much as possible can help reduce the risk of car crashes and falls on the ice, you may also face hazards inside your home.

- Take steps to heat your home safely and know what to do if the power goes out.
- Limit outdoor time and take precautions to stay safe and warm.

- Know the signs of hypothermia and frostbite and what to do if you or someone else has them.

Preparing for a winter storm

Safety Guidelines: During & After a Winter Storm

National Weather Service Winter Safety

Weather Forecasts

You can stay up to date by checking on the forecasts:

- **National Weather Service West (Pittsburgh)**
- **National Weather Service Northwest (Cleveland)**
- **National Weather Service Central (State College)**
- **National Weather Service Southeast (Philadelphia/Mt Holly)**
- **National Weather Service Northeast (Binghamton)**
- **Middle Atlantic River Forecast Center (MARFC)**

Additional tips and Resources

- Know if and where warming centers have been opened. Remember, public libraries act as warming centers during their regular operating hours. Other community warming centers may be open 24/7 and can be found on your city's government or county emergency management website and social media, or by calling 211 or 311. This information may also be available by calling 1-800-RED-CROSS (733-2767).

- Try to do everything you can to be ready. Think about having your disaster kit ready. Think about supplies in your car if you are going to be out and about.

- Bring your outside pets inside and keep them and your service animals warm. If there are outdoor pets who refuse to come inside, try to ensure they have a warm space to go to with plenty of food. Be sure to check on them.

- Think about water - for drinking, hand washing, teeth brushing, and flushing - in case your pipes freeze and/or burst. Be sure to have some for your pets as well. Remember, it's a gallon per day per person. Make sure you prioritize having enough water for everyone in the household, as our nation's infrastructure is decrepit and in need of serious repairs. While the water in your home might not freeze, that doesn't mean the infrastructure will hold up.

- Let water drip. A trickle of hot and cold water might be all it takes to keep your pipes from freezing. Let warm water drip overnight when temperatures are cold, preferably from a faucet mounted on a wall that faces the outside of your house.

- Adjust the thermostat. Keeping your thermostat set at the same temperature during both day and night also reduces the risk of frozen pipes. During extreme cold, this also helps reduce the strain on your home's heating system.

- Open cabinet doors. This allows heat to get to uninsulated pipes under sinks and appliances near exterior walls.

- Be prepared for power outages. Charge any external batteries to be able to charge phones, tablets, laptops. Know where your flashlights, lanterns, and batteries are to be able to find them quickly and easily. It's a good idea to have a flashlight beside everyone's bedside.

- If you lose power, some tips are putting blankets over windows and bedroom doors to help insulate the room. If you have tile or wooden floors and no rugs, put blankets, towels, even folded sheets down on the floor to help reduce the cold from the floor. Put bathmats and towels down on the bathroom floor to make it warmer. A towel on the toilet will help reduce the coolness a bit but it

will still be chilly to sit on.

- If you have a carbon monoxide detector, check if the batteries are working. Remember it should be at the same level as your bed height(s), NOT on the ceiling! If you resort to going into one closed-off room, remember to bring the carbon monoxide detector into the room with you.

- Be very careful with using candles for a light source and remember to put them out.

- Do NOT use a generator inside your home, garage, or enclosed spaces.

Disaster Tips – The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies

Winter Weather | Ready.gov

Winter Preparation For Your Vehicle | Department of Transportation | Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Winter Storm Preparedness & Blizzard Safety | Red Cross

Tips for extreme cold weather.

511PA Transportation Alerts and Current Road Conditions.

SEPTA Alerts | Serving Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia counties