



# Health and Welfare Alert

## Winter Weather #52-1-25

As a professional supporting people with developmental disabilities, the winter months may pose some additional risks due to inclement weather and conditions. By following some general winter safety precautions, we can help people manage seasonal challenges, such as travel and dangerous temperatures. Be aware that steps, sidewalks, and streets can be slippery from ice, even if it's not visible, which can increase the risk of falling. Being outside for too long in extreme cold can also pose health threats, such as frostbite or hypothermia. Make a plan so the person can successfully avoid extreme temperatures, such as when waiting for a bus.



## Prepare the Home for Cold Temperatures and Weather

1. Request that the furnace be checked and is in good order.
2. Check the carbon monoxide and smoke detectors.
3. Make sure you have extra supplies and food on hand. Keep an emergency kit that includes flashlights, extra batteries, a first-aid kit, extra medicine, etc.
4. If the power goes out, call your supervisor immediately. The people you support may be at greater risk for hypothermia and other concerns.

- Make a plan with your supervisor that is well communicated. For example, if the power has not returned by this time or the temperature falls below this level, we will be relocating to this location. Be clear about whom will be doing what, consider what medicines, supplies, and medical/adaptive equipment need to be taken, and who to notify.
- Make sure the power company is aware of the outage.
- Offer additional clothes. Be sure to consider the feet and hands.
- Shut off the gas. If there is a gas furnace and your heating system suddenly fails, make sure to shut off the gas immediately to prevent carbon monoxide leaks.
- The most common symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning are often described as “flu-like” – headache, dizziness, weakness, upset stomach, vomiting, chest pain, and confusion.
- Close all windows and doorways. You can roll up a towel and place it along the bottom to stop any draft.
- Use a portable heater. Alternatively, you can also use a portable, non-electric space heater to warm your home. However, make sure that your propane heaters are indoor-safe, as many of these products are designed solely for outdoor use. Use of such units in enclosed spaces can lead to a carbon monoxide buildup.
- Close off unused rooms to keep the warmth in the used sections of the home.

## Fast Facts

- People with diabetes, those who take high blood pressure medication, have poor circulation, or Raynaud's disease may be at a higher risk for hypothermia or other cold weather conditions.
- Forty percent of the body's heat is lost if a person's head is not covered.
- Carbon monoxide detectors save lives. Every year, over 400 people die from carbon monoxide poisoning.
- Be alert when using space heaters. Heaters that are not working properly or get knocked over can cause fire and death.
- You can get frostbite in 30 minutes or less when the wind chill is 15°F (-26°C) or lower.



## Protect Against the Cold

Being outside for too long in extreme cold can also pose health threats, such as frostbite or hypothermia. Make a plan so the person can successfully avoid extreme temperatures, such as when waiting for a bus.

- Wear appropriate footwear that is water-resistant with a sole that provides adequate traction.
- Traction devices are available with abrasive soles or cleats.
- Dress appropriately to stay warm.
- Wear brightly colored or reflective clothing, especially if walking when it is dark.

## Frostbite and Hypothermia

Frostbite is when the skin freezes. It often affects fingers, toes, and exposed skin, like the face, nose, and ears. Signs can include gray, white, or yellow skin; skin that looks waxy, or numbness.

### Frostbite Treatment

- Call 9-1-1. Don't rub a person's frostbitten skin. Warm the area slowly, but don't use heating pads.

Hypothermia is when the body loses too much heat and can't work properly. Signs can include cold feet and hands, pale skin, severe shivering, slurred speech, dizziness, trouble staying balanced, or a slow pulse.

### Hypothermia Treatment

- Call 9-1-1. Remove any wet clothing. Don't use direct heat to warm the person. Don't rub or massage the person.

## Things to Consider When Going Out or Traveling

- Be aware that steps, sidewalks, and streets can be slippery from ice, even if it's not visible, which can increase the risk of falling. Avoid walking on frozen waterways; don't assume the ice is safe.
- Leave early and take your time.
- Walk like a penguin. Model how taking short steps and walking flat footed can help when walking on ice or slippery surfaces.
- Check the forecast before heading out.
- Stock the car, van, or bus with needed supplies.
- Take extra clothing, blankets, and warm liquids on outings.
- Remember hats, gloves, scarves, heavy coats, and sturdy shoes.
- Keep your hands free when walking.
- Remove snow and ice from walkways frequently.
- Make sure that areas are well lit.
- Walk on designated pathways as much as possible.
- If you must walk on a slippery surface, slow down, take small steps, and keep your hands free for balance.
- Use special care when climbing or descending stairs, and entering or leaving buildings.
- Use handrails when available.
- Move slowly and look ahead.
- Maintain your center of balance.

## Keep the Lines of Communication Open

- Your cell phone can help with any emergency you may come across walking, driving, or at a person's home. It's important to keep a charged cell phone with you or anyone you are out with so you can call for help if anything were to happen!
- Talk about the weather conditions and risks of going out in bad weather.
- Express safety concerns to your supervisor, the landlord, or others early and continue until resolved.

