



Cold Weather Injuries

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The most dangerous type of cold weather injury is frostbite. Frostbite occurs when the body tissue freezes and the water molecules in the body have turned to ice. It affects the hands, feet, nose, and ears, parts of the body that are exposed to the elements. It is caused by decreased blood flow and the loss of body heat in that area which allows the skin and the water in the body to freeze. There are three classifications; the first degree which is an irritant to the skin, the second degree frostbite that will show blisters, but it does not have major damage, and the third degree which involves all the layers of the skin and causes permanent tissue damage. Symptoms of frostbite progress from a pain or burning sensation to numbness and even eventual loss of sensation to that area. Depending on the length of time of exposure, the skin can appear pale, red, bluish gray or black at its worse. The skin and underlying tissue may feel hard to the touch with the advanced injury. Complications from frostbite will depend if it's a first, second or third degree injury and also how it is treated. It may take several weeks to several months before you can really determine what kind of damage has been done. Sometimes cold sensitivity or numbness of the affected area will persist. To help prevent cold weather related injuries, one must be prepared for the cold. Having good preparation prior to exposure such as dressing warmly with multiple layers to cover the areas prone to injury, having a change of dry clothing and removing any wet clothing will decrease the possibility of frostbite. Always keep your hands and feet dry and avoid tight fitting clothing. Most importantly, move indoors to a warmer environment if you start to feel cold.

Some precautions that a person should do is avoid rubbing or massaging the affected area with snow, which is a common folk remedy, as it will only aggravate the injury. The use of dry heat such as a fire or portable heater can also lead to burns because of the lack of sensation. The young and the elderly are especially prone to cold related injuries. The use of alcohol also increases the risk of a cold weather injury. It is important not to thaw an extremity if it has been frostbitten if there is a risk of refreezing. Individuals with frostbite should consult a healthcare practitioner as soon as possible. Serious cold weather related injuries such as frostbite, can often require admission to the hospital.