

Staying Safe & Warm in Winter

By Denise Mann

COLD WEATHER doesn't have to mean the end to outdoor fun. In fact, for many, wintertime and outdoor activities go hand in hand. Whether you're hitting the slopes, taking a winter stroll or building a snowman in the front yard, here are a few considerations and suggestions for staying safe and warm in the great outdoors.

Winter weather hazards

Hypothermia and frostbite are two of the most common winter health hazards. Both can have serious consequences.

Hypothermia occurs when your body temperature drops, and you lose heat faster than you produce it, typically after exposure to cold temperatures or immersion in cold water. Many cases occur at temperatures between 30 and 50 degrees, and exposure to sweat or rain can accelerate the condition. Symptoms start with shivering, and can progress to confusion, drowsiness and loss of consciousness.

"The best thing to do is to get out of the cold, but if that is not possible, change out of your wet clothing or wring out as much water as possible," says Dr. David Beiser, an emergency room physician at the University of Chicago Medical Center in Illinois. If your body temperature drops below 90 degrees, you are in the danger zone and need immediate medical help, he says.

Frostbite can occur when your skin and tissues are exposed to freezing temperatures for a long period of time. Hands, feet, nose and ears are the most vulnerable. Symptoms include numbness, burning and hard, pale, waxy skin.

"Protect yourself by being educated about the symptoms of hypothermia and frostbite, dressing warmly and having a game plan for dealing with symptoms before you set out," Beiser says.

Bundle up in layers

When dressing for winter activities, layer like an onion, says Marrin Kammler, an outdoor sports instructor and personal trainer in New York City. "This means piling on thin layers of clothing so if you start to get too hot, you can peel a layer off," he says. "You can also

put a layer back on if you get cold again."

Start with a snug-fitting base layer made from a fabric that wicks away moisture, such as polyester, Lycra, nylon or spandex. Other options are merino wool and silk that has been treated to enhance wicking. Avoid cotton, which absorbs moisture. Base layers come in different weights for different levels of warmth.

"Your base layer is critical," says outdoor enthusiast Ken Liatsos, 45, of Northfield, Vt. Higher-quality fabrics wick moisture away from the skin more efficiently, so don't skimp when purchasing this layer, he says. "It's that dryness right against your skin that keeps you warm and helps you fend off hypothermia and the chills."

Top the base layer with looser wool or synthetic fleece clothing to help insulate you from the cold. A final, waterproof outer layer will repel moisture and wind. Liatsos, who hunts for days at a time in the backcountry of northern Vermont, suggests wearing three or four layers.

Pay special attention to your hands, feet and head—areas that are especially vulnerable to the cold. Mittens provide greater warmth than gloves, and a hat will help hold in your body heat.

"Socks are incredibly important," says Liatsos, who suggests socks made from a densely knit material to wick up moisture, hold in heat and prevent blisters and frostbite. "You need to keep your feet warm and dry."

Don't forget sunglasses, to protect your eyes from bright winter sun and reflection off snow, as well as sunscreen and lip balm, to keep skin safe and comfortable.

Stay hydrated

While it's easy to remember to drink water when playing sports under the hot sun, it's just as important to stay hydrated during winter activities, when you may be sweating without realizing it. "The feet of skiers or snowboarders can sweat out about an ounce of moisture into each boot before lunch and that fluid has

to be replaced," says Henry Hornberger, general manager of Brian Head Resort in Utah. Even slower-paced activities can result in dehydration.

"Keep a water bottle next to you, not in your backpack where it is hard to reach, and take a sip of water every 10 to 15 minutes," Kammler says.

Early signs of dehydration include a dry, sticky mouth, thirst, decreased urine output, headache, fatigue and dizziness. ★

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