

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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NEWS RELEASE

Prolonged period of cold weather ahead prompts warnings to take winter precautions

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Alabama residents should take precautions as the state faces an expected prolonged period of cold weather. According to the National Weather Service, temperatures at several locations across Central Alabama may set new records for prolonged cold. Temperatures in many locations are not predicted to be above freezing for two to three days, with the coldest weather occurring between Friday and Sunday. Wind chill temperatures across Northern and Central Alabama are expected to fall below zero Friday morning.

Cold weather health emergencies can occur at times of low temperatures, high winds and high humidity. Hypothermia, a lowering of the temperature of the body's inner core, can occur at outside temperatures as high as 45 degrees F. When the core temperature falls, bodily functions are shut down.

Most hypothermia victims are elderly persons who are unable to keep sufficiently warm in winter. As the body ages, it gradually loses its sensitivity to cold. An elderly person's body temperature may drop without the individual being aware of it. In addition, the aging body also becomes increasingly less able to reverse a fall in temperature. This reduced ability to adapt is also present in the very young. Aside from the elderly, babies are the most common victims of hypothermia.

Dr. Donald Williamson, state health officer, said, "Remember to check on elderly neighbors and relatives at this time of dangerously low temperatures. The risk of hypothermia is increased if an elderly person is also suffering from a disorder that reduces the body's heat production, impaired mental function or reduced mobility. Certain drugs such as tranquilizers may also contribute to the onset of hypothermia. Abnormally cold weather can also increase the threat of home fires due to improper use of alternate heating sources."

"The Alabama Emergency Management Agency is working with other state agencies and local EMAs to closely monitor this dangerously cold winter weather," said AEMA director Brock Long. "We are asking citizens to do their part and make sure their family, friends, pets and homes are secure from the extreme temperatures."

Hypothermia may develop if people are exposed to severe cold. The signs and symptoms of hypothermia include shivering, dizziness, numbness, weakness, impaired judgment, impaired vision and drowsiness.

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Winter

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Call a health professional and get the victim of hypothermia to medical care as soon as possible if the victim seems confused-- one of the first signs of hypothermia—or if the body temperature does not return to normal.

Until emergency medical help arrives, follow these methods help to maintain warmth:

- Get the victim out of the wind and rain
- Remove wet clothing and replace it with dry or wool clothing, if possible. Being wet speeds up hypothermia.
- Use body heat to warm the victim. Get inside a sleeping bag with the victim or wrap yourself in a blanket with the victim. If several people are with you, have everyone huddle around the victim.
- If the victim is conscious, have him drink warm fluids such as sweetened tea, broth or juice, eat candy and other quick-energy foods
- Do not give food or drink if the victim is unconscious.
- Do not allow the victim to drink alcoholic beverages in any circumstance.

Any time a person must be out of doors for several hours in cold weather, the Alabama Department of Public Health recommends the following precautions:

- Dress warmly in layers of clothing and wear fabric that remains warm even when wet, such as wool.
- Wear wind- and water-proof clothing.
- Wear a warm hat and gloves. An unprotected head may lose up to half of the body's total heat production at 40 degrees F.
- Head for shelter if you get wet or cold.
- Do not drink alcohol while in the cold. It causes the body to lose heat faster.

To prevent hypothermia, an elderly person's living quarters should be heated to at least 65 degrees F., he or she should wear suitable clothing, have plenty of warm blankets available and eat nutritious food.

According to the Center for Health Statistics of the Alabama Department of Public Health, the following numbers of Alabamians suffered cold-related deaths in recent years: 2008, 12; 2007, 4; 2006, 5; 2005, 9; 2004, 13; 2003, 5; 2002, 9, 2001, 16; 2000, 15, 1999, 17.

For more information on being prepared, log on to www.ema.alabama.gov.

For information about heating source safety visit adph.org/injury-prevention/