

## A Refresher on Winter Hiking – Preventing hypothermia

Perhaps the greatest threat of winter hiking in the brutal cold is hypothermia. Hypothermia can be defined as a life-threatening emergency where the body cannot keep itself warm, due to exposure to cold, wet and windy weather. Even prolonged exposure to air temperatures in the 50s, or submersion in water temperatures in the 60s can cause hypothermia, and people over the age of 65 are at greater risk. If the coming winter is as freezing as last winter, the risk of hypothermia is obvious: the lower the ambient temperature, the quicker hypothermia sets in and the less time you have to correct it.

It's important for all hikers to become familiar with the signs and symptoms of hypothermia because its onset is so gradual that those inflicted don't realize it's affecting them. The first sign of hypothermia is "stupidity" or confusion: when your brain gets cold, it doesn't function efficiently. For example, a hiker with mild hypothermia when asked if they would be warmer if they zip their coat up will say "no", or if asked what  $3 + 4 =$  will have to think about it long and hard. Look for the signs of the "umbles"- stumbling, mumbling, fumbling and grumbling. Uncontrollable shivering followed by a lack of shivering is an additional cue that your fellow hiker is in serious trouble. If you suspect a fellow hiker is hypothermic, the goal is to get them to a warm, dry place as quickly as possible and call for help.

A little preplanning goes a long way in preventing hypothermia:

- Avoid wearing cotton. COTTON KILLS because it traps moisture/sweat against your skin. Wear polypropylene or synthetic material that wicks moisture away from your body. Invest in a quality pair of wool socks and wool glove liners. Wool will keep you warm even if it gets wet.
- Layer it up! Multiple thin layers of clothing trap more warmth against your skin than one thick layer. A good rule of thumb is to start with soft, wicking fabric next to your skin (all the way down to your knickers). Add an extra fleece layer. Top it off with a material that will challenge wetness and wind such as GoreTex. Leave all cotton at home!
- Don't forget to eat before hiking! Your body will generate heat as it burns the fuel/calories you've consumed.
- Always have a hat and gloves handy. No kidding, if your feet are cold, put on a hat even if it has furry ear flaps! Warming your head will result in your extremities being toastier. Waterproof hiking boots are a must.
- Did I mention avoiding cotton?
- Don't forget to drink fluids. The drier winter air will suck more moisture out of you with every breath you take. Bringing a thermos with warm broth, tea, coffee or another beverage will help keep you warm. Remember to avoid alcoholic beverages as they will only lower your body temperature further.
- Consider throwing a pack or two of chemical handwarmers (like Hotties) in your hiking pack, just in case you or a fellow hiker require them someday.
- Lastly, don't sweat! Really, really try not to sweat. Once you get wet with sweat, you're at increased risk of getting chilled and hypothermic. Try to begin a hike feeling a bit cold. Ten to twenty minutes into the hike you'll begin to warm up and be safe from hypothermia!

Hike smart and safely!

By Karen Pressman