

Hypothermia: How to Stay Warm When Losing Body Heat

During the winter season, you will read about motorists that got stuck in snowdrifts and lose their lives.

The same fate awaits the outdoor enthusiast, prepper, or seasonal camper who gets caught unprepared by an early winter storm. The saddest thing is that many people succumb a few miles away from camp.

Some of the fatalities reported over the last twenty years were not even the result of the winter's blizzards or the challenging living conditions. Deaths occurred during times when the temperature was well above the freezing point. The main culprit in these cases was hypothermia.

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This article should provide you with all the knowledge needed to prevent body heat loss during your trips out in nature. You should be aware that hypothermia occurs not only in cold regions, but there's also mild weather hypothermia in environments with temperatures between 30- and 60- degrees F.

Once you understand how your body produces heat and how it loses the stored heat, you should take all the precautionary measures.

The dangers of hypothermia

One of the most common mistakes some outdoor enthusiasts and wilderness explorers make is not understanding the hypothermia process and how it can affect the human body. Some victims had suitable clothing for the season, yet they didn't maintain a steady body temperature.

They removed various layers and allowed their bodies to cool down without being aware that their mistakes would put them in a dire situation. By the time they understood that they would not recapture the lost warmth, it was already too late. Hypothermia has already sneaked in.

What is this hypothermia condition, and how can it kill you even in moderate climates?

Back in the old days, people “froze to death” in sub-zero temperatures, and when the temperature was way above the freezing point, the most used phrase was “..death by exposure”.



Even if some folks froze to death while others due to cold exposure, the cause of death was always the same, hypothermia. That is when the body temperature falls below 98.6 degrees F, and it stays below normal for extended periods.

The mechanics of hypothermia are relatively simple, and the

moment your body starts to lose heat faster than it can keep from the environment or manufacture, it's usually the starting point when hypothermia starts to develop.

There are two main things that survivalists need to do to prevent hypothermia. One is to supply your body with constant food, which provides fuel for your body, and the second is to allow the excess heat to leave your body, nothing more, nothing less.

While you can carry food in your bug out bag and energize your body at regular hours, the staying warm part is a little bit more complicated.

Staying warm when hypothermia sets in is complicated, and it requires much more effort and heat to get it back above the average body temperature. The momentum hypothermia creates is difficult to reverse since the victim is not aware of it. When you become aware, as previously said, it's probably too late.

Suppose you look at the world map and identify suitable regions for someone to experience hypothermia. In such a case, you will point to the landmasses that are more susceptible to cold temperatures. You will not pick the tropical lands since we humans feel more comfortable in tropical climates.

Your reasoning for choosing colder regions might be logical. Still, you will be surprised to find out that most of the tropical lands you left aside can also provide a deadly dose of hypothermia.

That can occur during the night or at high elevations, regardless if you find yourself in Minnesota or Hawaii. This knowledge alone can save you from disaster, and it will provide valuable preparation lessons for surviving the cold.

When body temperature drops, it starts a specific self-defense mechanism. The blood vessels of your skin will begin to close as the body's primary function is to protect the central core

(heart, lungs, livers).

The body will sacrifice the extremities to send more blood to its core; thus, your toes and fingers will get numb, which leads to frostbites. If you don't do something to warm them up, you may end up losing any body part affected by frostbite.

Hypothermia poses an even bigger problem to those suffering from pre-existing health conditions. As you start to get cold, every cell of your body will operate at half capacity, which will affect various organs, leading to poor health.

For example, suppose you are fighting an infection and are unaware that hypothermia is setting in. In that case, your body's defense will become too weak to fight said infection since it now struggles to get warm.

We need to know how our body controls its temperature, how it produces heat, and how to prevent hypothermia.

How does your body control its temperature?

There are three basic processes through which your body regulates its internal temperature. These are respiration, evaporation, and radiation.

As you breathe, you expel hot air from your lungs and get an intake of fresh, colder air. In case your body produces more heat than it uses, you will sweat. This process helps cooling down your body since the moisture from your body also draws out the heat. Your skin also helps cool down the body, and every blood vessel on your skin will radiate heat into the air once the body starts to overheat.

Keep in mind that your head is the part that radiates heat the most. At high elevations, it is mandatory to protect your head and face.

These processes are beneficial for keeping your body at a stable temperature, but at the same time, they can also release more heat than needed.

How is body heat produced?

There is an involuntary and a voluntary process that helps your body produce more heat. The involuntary one is a chemical, metabolic process, and it occurs when you fuel your body with food. As your body breaks down the food, it produces energy, known in simple terms as burning calories.

Now, the caloric intake you need is the tricky part. You can burn 2,000 calories during a pleasant walk out in nature, and you can replace those calories with a few light meals or snacks.

SPOT

FROSTBITE

A victim is often unaware of frostbite because frozen tissue is numb.



Signs & Symptoms

- Redness or pain in any skin area may be the first sign of frostbite.

Other signs include:

- a white or grayish-yellow skin area
- skin that feels unusually firm or waxy
- numbness

HYPOTHERMIA

Hypothermia often occurs at very cold temperatures, but can occur at cool temperatures (above 40°F), if a person is wet (from rain, sweat or cold water) and becomes chilled.



Signs & Symptoms

Adults:

- shivering
- exhaustion
- confusion
- fumbling hands
- memory loss
- slurred speech
- drowsiness

Infants:

- bright red, cold skin
- very low energy



If a person's temperature is below 95° get medical attention immediately.

However, those living and working in colder regions may require more than 6,000 per day, depending on their activity. Maintaining such a high level of calorie intake requires a special diet. One with an increased number of calories and the daily nutritional requirements (vitamins, minerals, and essential amino acids).

Besides the food intake, you must also ensure a fair amount of liquid intake to hydrate your body. There are some dangerous myths about using various beverages to keep your body warm and hydrated. People drink alcohol or hot coffee to get warm, but these two drinks do more harm than good.

Alcohol will make you feel warm when consuming it but will also draw heat away from the body. The liver will use more energy, trying to decompose the alcohol, which will draw heat

from other organs.

As for coffee, you should know that caffeine is a mild vasodilator. Instead of shrinking to prevent the heat from escaping, the blood vessels from your skin will do the opposite. You may indeed gain some energy from drinking coffee, but you will lose heat the more coffee you drink.

Your best bet would be to stick to warm water and tea, and hot chocolate. For example, I drink hot chocolate during my winter camping sessions and I add a teaspoon of coconut oil mixed with chili flakes. There's nothing better to warm your body, and I advise trying such a beverage when exploring the great outdoors during the winter season.

The voluntary process is the stimulation of muscles or, simply put, exercising. Any activity that gets your muscles working will produce heat, and you can control the heat production by doing various activities. For example, walking can double your heat production, while a short but intense exercising session will raise your energy level up to 10 times.

How can you prevent hypothermia?

As stated before, the three basic processes that help your body regulate temperature can also lead to severe body heat loss. But those are not the only things you have to worry about. Conduction and convection are the two other things you should pay attention to.

The heat flowing through your body can pass to the surrounding environment. When you sleep on the ground or take a cold bath, conduction occurs, and your body loses heat faster than it can replace.

The same thing goes with convection, and the heat radiated from your body that makes a protective shield around your skin can be replaced by moving cold air. That heat layer will have

to be replaced continually, and faster air movement leads to a more significant heat loss.

That means one thing, and that's making sure you're always putting a protective layer between your body and cold objects.

Always add padding on the ground when improvising a shelter, and don't get in contact when you're crossing a river or stream using a boat. Your feet must be protected at all times since these body parts are in constant contact with the ground. It would be best if you had a pair of proper boots and a few pairs of socks when exploring the great outdoors.

When it comes to convection, you must prevent the wind from blowing away heat from your body. That means you need to wear windproof clothing, and you should always put a layer of protection between you and the wind, especially when you set up camp.

Another thing that is often ignored is the breathing process. This process helps regulate body temperature by releasing hot air from the core (lungs). That's why you often blow on your hands to warm them up during a chilly evening. However, the breathing process is a double-edged sword since the more air you breathe, the more heat you end up losing.

Besides pacing yourself to reduce breathing intensity when exploring the great outdoors, you should also wear something to cover your mouth and nose. Even more, some survival experts recommend breathing only through your nose since the hair in your nostrils can also help warm the air you breathe in.



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