

Hypothermia

Recognition & Prevention

A serious medical condition in which a person's body temperature falls below the usual level (>35°C) as a result of being in severe cold for a long time

NHS Frimley ICB, Safeguarding Team
Author: Dr Anneka Clarke, 10/2022

High risk groups¹

- People with cardiovascular conditions
- People with mental health conditions
- Older people (65 and older)
- Pregnant women
- People who move in and out of homelessness
- People who have attended hospital due to a fall
- People with respiratory conditions (COPD, asthma)
- People with disabilities
- Young children (under five)
- People on a low income
- People with drug or alcohol addictions
- Recent immigrants and asylum-seekers

Signs & symptoms³

- Shivering
- Pale skin, blue lips
- Slurred speech or mumbling
- Slow, shallow breathing
- Weak pulse
- Clumsiness or lack of co-ordination
- Drowsiness or very low energy
- Confusion or memory loss
- Loss of consciousness



Learning from Safety Incidents
Issue 8: Hypothermia²

Hypothermia can develop in vulnerable people after a relatively short exposure to cold weather.

It can even develop after a small drop in room temperature.

Many people who use Health & Social Care services may be at risk of developing hypothermia. They include:

- Older people in Care Homes or receiving care at home
- People with reduced mental capacity, reduced mobility or a sensory impairment
- People who cannot communicate that they are exposed to cold



Safeguarding considerations

- 1 What **factors** could have led to the hypothermia?
- 2 If a **child** has hypothermia, have you done a MASH referral?
- 3 If a **vulnerable adult with care needs** has hypothermia (e.g. a disabled person being cared for by family), have you done an Adult Safeguarding Referral?
- 4 If the patient is in a **nursing home or residential care**, have you done an Adult Safeguarding Referral/spoken to your Safeguarding Lead?
- 5 Are there any **other household members at risk**, such as children or other vulnerable adults?
- 6 Is there any **Self-Neglect/Hoarding?** Does the patient have mental capacity? If so, consider implementing the **Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Framework⁴ (MARF)**
- 7 Does the patient have any history of **severe mental illness, alcohol dependence or substance misuse?**
- 8 Are there any potential **future risks** to the individual and to the wider community e.g. use of unsafe open fires, where the chimney may not have been swept/old gas fires which could be hazardous?
- 9 Is the patient a victim of **economic (financial) abuse** and cannot afford heating?
- 10 Is there any risk of **exploitation or cuckooing?**

Immediate treatment³

- **Do** call 999 ambulance
- **Do** remove any wet clothing or pads
- **Do** warm patient up slowly with blankets and a hat
- **Do** give warm drink or soup
- **Do** give a high calorie snack, like chocolate
- **Do** keep the patient awake and talking until help arrives
- **Don't** rewarm the patient too quickly, such as with a heater or hot bath
- **Don't** attempt to warm the arms and legs – heating and massaging the limbs can stress the heart and lungs
- **Don't** give the patient alcohol or a cigarette

Tips for safety and prevention

- 1 Consider giving **opportunistic advice** during consultations with older people on **staying warm and well at home this winter** (warm clothing, thermal vests and layers, hats, thick socks, warm drinks, good nutrition and getting up and moving regularly)
- 2 **Be inquisitive when on home visits:**
 - Does the environment feel cold?
 - Is the central heating on?
 - Is the patient able to access hot drinks and meals?
- 3 Is the patient using a **small gas heater or paraffin heater without adequate ventilation?**
 - **THINK** carbon monoxide
 - **THINK** fire risk
- 4 Refer patient to the **Social Prescriber** for support with accessing Winter Fuel Payments, boiler services etc.
- 5 *Signpost to Age UK website:*
<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/keep-well-this-winter/stay-healthy-in-winter>

¹ Excess winter deaths and illness and the health risks associated with cold home: NICE Guideline [NG6], published 05/03/15

² <https://www.cqc.org.uk/guidance-providers/learning-safety-incidents/issue-8-hypothermia>

³ <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/hypothermia/>

⁴ <https://www.rbwmsafeguardingpartnership.org.uk/p/safeguarding-adults/multi-agency-risk-management-framework>