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How to Protect Yourself in Extremely Cold Weather

Get cozy.



Several areas of the U.S. are experiencing—or will soon experience—ridiculously cold weather. Chicago, for example, is facing lows of –20 degrees and colder, and the city is expected to have a high (yes, *high*) of –13 degrees on Wednesday, according to the Weather Channel.

It's so cold in some areas that several Midwest cities are experiencing temperatures below what Antarctica and Alaska are experiencing. This frigid weather is expected to march east, where it could freeze out other cities.

Many schools are closed due to the weather, and health officials are warning people to stay indoors. "This is really serious," Nicholas Kman, M.D., an emergency medicine physician at the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center, tells SELF. He's located in Columbus, Ohio, which is expected to see wind chills as low as –40 degrees over the next few days.

Cold weather like this can cause new health issues as well as exacerbate many chronic conditions.

Dr. Kman says one huge concern is hypothermia, which develops when your body loses heat faster than it can produce heat. Hypothermia can cause your body temperature to dip below 95 degrees, per the Mayo Clinic. At that point, your heart, nervous system, and other organs can't work normally. And if hypothermia is left untreated, you can die. "Your body can lose heat very quickly when it's that cold outside," Dr. Kman says.

Frostbite, an injury that's caused by freezing the skin and underlying tissues, is also a major issue, according to Dr. Kman. "Exposed skin in extreme temperatures can develop frostbite very quickly—in a matter of minutes," he says.

Pulmonary issues are also "very concerning" in this kind of weather, Dr. Kman says. If you have an underlying lung issue like asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), cold air can cause your lungs to constrict and trigger an asthma attack or bronchospasms (in which the muscles in the walls of your airways tighten), Raymond Casciari, M.D., a pulmonologist at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange, Calif., tells SELF.

"Even for folks with no known lung disease, with temperatures this low, your lungs will spasm in this cold weather," he says, and you might feel like you have asthma even if you don't. "You will not be able to catch your breath," he adds. That can cause people to panic (understandably) and lead to even worse symptoms.

Cold weather is also more likely to make dry skin, eczema, and psoriasis worse, **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital, tells SELF. "The cold weather takes the moisture out of the skin, causing inflammation," he says. "This can occur immediately after cold-weather exposure, or up to two weeks later." Even if you don't have an underlying skin condition, exposing your skin to cold weather can cause it to crack, opening it up to infection, Dr. Goldenberg explains.

Autoimmune conditions like rheumatoid arthritis can also get worse in extreme cold, Ayesha Cheema, M.D., a primary care physician at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, tells SELF. "Extreme weather can cause stress on your body, which is thought to contribute to flare-up of autoimmune disorders," she explains. "A drop in barometric pressure can contribute to worsening joint problems, including joint swelling."

Contrary to popular belief, cold weather doesn't actually cause illnesses like the cold or flu, infectious disease expert Amesh A. Adalja, M.D., senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, tells SELF. That being said, the weather could still have an indirect effect. For instance, certain viruses like the flu thrive in the cold and low humidity (which typically comes along with cold temperatures), he says. Couple that with the fact that more people will be staying indoors, and you may be at a greater risk of catching the flu. "If you're indoors more, the flu can find more people to infect," Dr. Adalja explains.

There are a few things you can do to keep yourself safe.

Of course, stay indoors if you can. “If you don’t have to be exposed, don’t go out in it,” Dr. Casciari says. “The smart thing to do is to ride it out inside.”

Before a storm or cold weather hits, it’s helpful to prepare your home, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) explains. That includes getting all your weatherproofing done (like insulating any water lines that might freeze), gathering emergency supplies, getting your flue inspected if you plan to use your fireplace for emergency heating, and making sure the batteries are fresh in your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. Basically, prepare for your home to be your base of operations for a while.

If you have to drive somewhere at any point, Dr. Kman recommends having an emergency kit with you that includes jumper cables, extra clothing, a first aid kit, and food and water. And, if you happen to get stuck in your car, make sure your tailpipe isn’t covered by anything like snow—that could cause fumes to come back into your car and lead to carbon monoxide poisoning, Dr. Kman says.

While you are inside, you’ll want to practice good hand hygiene, try to steer clear of people who are sick, and do your best to avoid touching your nose and mouth as much as possible, Dr. Adalja says. You’ll also want to monitor everyone’s body temperature (especially if there are any infants in your household) and keep an eye on the temperature in your home, the CDC says. If possible, avoid caffeine and alcohol in favor of broth and warm, sweet beverages that will help you keep up your body temperature.

If you do have to venture outside, here's how to protect yourself.

It’s crucial to cover every exposed part of your body that you can—especially areas that are more prone to losing heat quickly, like your neck, head, hands, and feet, Dr. Kman says; that means wearing a hat, gloves, warm socks and boots, and a scarf. You’ll want cover your nose and mouth with that scarf as well, and keep it there, Dr. Casciari says. This helps the air that’s going into your body to warm up a little before it reaches your airways, and lowers the odds you’ll have asthma-like symptoms when you breathe in.

In addition to staying warm, the CDC also recommends doing your best to stay dry, which means opting for waterproof outerwear and dressing in layers. (If you start to sweat, that increases the amount of heat you lose, so it’s important to be able to remove a layer when necessary.) And even when you’re bundled up, you want to severely limit the amount of time you spend outside. “You really don’t want to be out for more than a few minutes, if you can help it,” Dr. Casciari says. “This is really a dangerous situation.”

Because cold weather puts extra strain on your heart, you want to avoid exerting yourself too much while outside. If you do have to take care of any outdoor chores, the CDC recommends working slowly and taking it easy (and, of course, dressing as warmly as possible). If you start shivering, that’s a sign that your body is losing heat, which could become dangerous if it continues, the CDC says. So take that seriously and head indoors as soon as you can.

Overall, really, *really* try to stay inside if you can—and accept that our human tolerance to dangerously cold temperatures may not be as high as you think. “People think they can tough out extreme cold—they can’t,” Dr. Casciari says.