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WINTER WEATHER ADVISORY: PREVENTING FROST BITE AND HYPOTHERMIA

CHATTANOOGA, TN – As the Tennessee Valley braces for a blast of Arctic air, it's important to remember the extreme cold temperatures can lead to health emergencies, including frost bite and hypothermia. People who work and play outdoors, and those who don't have heat or proper insulation, are at risk for developing these weather-related conditions.

"Frost bite is an injury cause by freezing. It's most common on fingers and toes, and the ears, nose, cheeks and chin. It is possible to get frost bite even though your skin is covered so you need to make sure you have properly protected yourself against exposure to the extreme cold, wet and windy conditions," explains Sarah Baker, M.D., with CHI Memorial Primary Care Associates – Atrium. She recommends wearing several layers of loose clothing; wear mittens instead of gloves; make sure your hat covers your ears; and keep your feet warm and dry with thick socks.

Symptoms of Frost Bite

Reduced blood flow to hands & feet

Numbness

Tingling or stinging

Aching

Bluish or pale, waxy skin

Source: CDC

If you notice any of these symptoms:

- Go inside immediately.
- Remove any clothing or jewelry that could interfere with blood circulation.
- Soak the affected area warm (not hot) water until the tissue begins to feel soft again.
- Unless absolutely necessary, do not walk on frostbitten feet or toes-this increases the damage.
- Warm the affected area using body heat; for example, the heat of an armpit can be used to warm frostbitten fingers.
- Do not rub or massage the frostbitten area; doing so may cause more damage.
- Do not use a heating pad, heat lamp, or the heat of a stove, fireplace, or radiator for warming. Affected areas are numb and can be easily burned.

"If you don't treat these symptoms immediately, your condition will continue to deteriorate into deep frostbite. You will lose all feeling, possibly develop blisters and with extreme amounts of exposure, the skin tissues will die and turn black. That could lead to amputation," says Dr. Baker.

Hypothermia is another serious condition associated with the extreme cold. The body begins to lose heat faster than it can make it when exposed to freezing temperatures. Extended exposure to the cold can result in hypothermia, when the body temperature drops below 95°. (Normal body temperature is 98.6°.) “A person may not think clearly or move well once the body temperature is that low,” explains Jacqueline Gentry, M.D., with CHI Memorial Primary Care Associates – Atrium. “He or she may not realize what is happening to the body and not do anything to about it.”

Symptoms of hypothermia

<i>Early symptoms</i>	<i>Late symptoms</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shivering • Fatigue • Loss of coordination • Confusion & disorientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No shivering • Blue skin • Dilated pupils • Slowed pulse & breathing • Loss of consciousness

Source: CDC

If you notice these symptoms in yourself or someone you're with:

- Call for medical attention
- Get inside and remove wet clothing
- Use blankets, pillows, towels or newspapers around the body
- Cover the head to keep in body heat

You can take action to limit your exposure to freezing temperatures and reduce the chance of developing frost bite or hypothermia. “Stay inside as much as possible,” says Dr. Gentry. “If you have to be outside or exposed for extended periods of times, try to follow these precautions:

- Wear several layers of clothing for the best insulation. Make sure your clothes are loose. Tight clothing can reduce the blood circulation to your extremities.
- Wear boots that are waterproof and insulated.
- Wear a hat to reduce the amount of body heat that escapes. A hat will keep your whole body warmer.
- Take frequent breaks and move into a warm location.
- Monitor your physical condition and that of your coworkers.

“Staying safe in below freezing temperatures can be challenging,” says Dr. Gentry. “By following a handful of common sense steps, you can stay warm and healthy whether you're outside for work or just enjoying the snow.”

About CHI Memorial Medical Group

CHI Memorial Medical Group is part of CHI Memorial, a not-for-profit, faith-based healthcare organization dedicated to the healing ministry of the Church. CHI Memorial Medical Group has convenient locations throughout Southeast Tennessee and North Georgia. Our network of dedicated physicians provides quality health care for the entire family. Specialties include family and internal medicine, pediatrics, surgical oncology, urology, pulmonology, and gynecology. To find a physician near you, visit www.chimemorialmedicalgroup.org.