

# Portage Prepares

Helping Portage County Citizens prepare for emergencies and disasters.



Office of Homeland Security &  
Emergency Management

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## Cold Weather Health Tips for Seniors

Cold weather can pose serious health hazards to older adults. Falls and other accidents, hypothermia and depression are more common as the temperature drops. The key to safety is prevention. Follow these simple tips to ensure a safe season.

### Protect Your Skin

As we age our skin becomes thinner and drier and thus more susceptible to tears. In addition, certain medications can thin already fragile nasal tissue, creating a risk of nosebleeds. To lessen the possibility of dangers associated with dryness:

- Keep room air moist. Add a humidifier to your heating unit, if possible, or purchase a separate humidifier or vaporizer. Another option is to place a pan filled with water near a heat source such as a radiator. Remember to change the water daily.
- Keep your body moist! Drink plenty of water and other fluids. Eat foods with high water content like soups and vegetables.
- Moisturize your skin with creams or lotions. Use nasal lubricants or petroleum jelly to protect the lining of

### Watch out for Ice

More than 1.6 million older Americans go to the emergency room each year for fall-related injuries, according to the National Institutes of Health. But falls don't have to happen, even when snow and ice make for slippery conditions.



To lessen the chance of falling in cold weather:

- Stretch before going outside. Stretching improves circulation and limbers muscles.
- Wear sensible footwear. Shoes should have low heels, good support and non-skid soles.
- Stick to cleared sidewalks and roads. Shovel snow and sprinkle sand or salt on icy areas - or ask someone to do it for you.
- Use assistive devices when necessary. Hold handrails on stairs. Use a cane or walker if necessary to help maintain balance.
- Avoid going outside when conditions are poor. Exercise indoors. Stock up on necessities in good weather, or ask someone to deliver them to you.

### Stay Warm

As people age, their sense of touch declines. Arthritis, diabetes, poor circulation, paralysis caused by stroke and many other conditions can cause lack of feeling, especially in the extremities. A diminished response to cold can put seniors at risk for hypothermia (abnormally low body temperature). To prevent hypothermia:

- Keep your home's thermostat set at 68 degrees F or above. If paying your energy bill is a burden, you may be eligible for fuel assistance. Contact the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/liheap>), a public service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, or the Eldercare Locator (<http://www.eldercare.gov>), a public service of the U.S. Administration on Aging.
- To reduce heating costs, make your home more energy efficient. Contact the U.S. Department of Energy's Weatherization Assistance Program (<http://www.eere.energy.gov/weatherization>) to see if you're eligible for home improvements paid for by the program.
- Dress in loose-fitting, layered, lightweight clothes for warmth.
- Keep your head covered when you're outdoors. A great deal of body heat is lost through the head.
- Wear mittens or gloves outdoors.
- Eat well. Food provides the body with energy. Remember, calories are a measure of heat! Seniors who have difficulty preparing their own food can have a member organization of the Meals on Wheels Association of America (MOWAA) deliver nutritious meals (<http://www.mowaa.org>).
- Be alert for symptoms of hypothermia and frostbite. Hypothermia symptoms include slurred speech, sluggishness, confusion, dizziness, shallow breathing, unusual behavior and slow, irregular heartbeat. Frostbite symptoms include gray, white or yellow skin discoloration, numbness and a waxy feeling to the skin. If either of these conditions is suspected get immediate emergency help. Warm the body, but avoid rubbing tender

Reduced sensitivity to temperature can also cause burns from too-hot water. To prevent burns:

- Set the temperature on the hot water heater to 120 degrees F or lower.
- When using faucets, turn on cold water first and then add hot water. When turning off the

## WINTER SAFETY



### Keep Your Spirits High

Perhaps the most devastating threat to seniors in wintertime is depression. Inclement weather can restrict activities and opportunities to mingle with others. The isolation and loneliness that afflict many seniors become even worse when the weather is harsh. Shorter days mean less sunlight, which can also contribute to depression. To prevent depression:

- Socialize. Make an effort to visit with family and friends. Contact a local Council on Aging for help locating transportation services, senior centers and social activities.
- When the weather is too harsh for travel, pick up the phone and call a friend or relative for a chat.

### Be Prepared for an Emergency

Winter storms can mean power outages and resultant loss of heat, water and telephone services. Inclement weather can mean difficulty going out for necessary supplies. Be prepared for emergencies:

- Stock up on food and fresh water. Some Meals on Wheels programs provide frozen emergency food packs that can be heated on days when there is no delivery.
- Keep batteries, candles, flashlights, Sterno fuel, extra blankets and a battery-operated radio on hand.

Don't wait for emergencies to develop a system of communication. Everyone living alone should develop a "buddy system."

## Cold Weather Resources

The following resources for seniors can help with winter weather concerns:

Information about the risks of falling and what you can do to prevent falls can be found on the [National Institutes of Health NIH Senior Health Web site](#).

Fuel assistance programs are administered at the state level, and eligibility varies by state. To find a program in your area, as well as many other services for seniors, use the [Eldercare Locator](#), a service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The [Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program](#), a public service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, collects, develops, organizes and disseminates information on low-income energy issues.

The [U.S. Department of Energy's Weatherization Assistance Program](#) helps low-income families and individuals make their homes more energy efficient, thus reducing energy bills.

[Meals on Wheels Association of America](#) (MOWAA) is the oldest and largest organization in the United States representing those who provide meal services to people in need.