

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
**December 10, 2009**

**CONTACT: Kenneth Severson**  
**(317) 233-7104**

## **COLD WEATHER BRINGS RISK OF FROSTBITE AND HYPOTHERMIA**

INDIANAPOLIS—Current cold temperatures can make staying warm and dry a challenge. State health officials are urging Hoosiers to take steps to avoid prolonged exposure to the cold.

“Hypothermia occurs when people are exposed to cold temperatures,” said Joan Duwve, M.D., medical director for Public Health and Preparedness at the State Department of Health. “A person’s body begins to lose heat faster than it can be produced and prolonged exposure to the cold will ultimately use up your body’s stored energy. This results in hypothermia, or abnormally low body temperature.”

Dr. Duwve says a low body temperature affects the brain, making the victim unable to think clearly or move well. This makes hypothermia particularly dangerous because a person may not know it is happening, making them helpless to do anything about it.

According to Dr. Duwve, frostbite occurs with an injury to the body that is caused by freezing. Frostbite causes a loss of feeling and color in affected areas. It most often affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers, or toes. Frostbite can permanently damage the body, and in severe cases lead to amputation. The risk of frostbite increases in people with reduced blood circulation and among people who are not dressed properly for extremely cold temperatures.

Exposure to cold can cause life-threatening health conditions. Avoid serious conditions such as frostbite and hypothermia, by keeping warm and wearing the following items:

- a hat or hood as most heat is lost through the head;
- a scarf or knit mask to cover face and mouth;
- sleeves that are snug at the wrist;
- mittens (they are warmer than gloves);
- water-resistant coat and boots; and
- several layers of loose-fitting clothing.

State health officials recommend people ensure the outer layer of their clothing is tightly woven, preferably wind resistant, to reduce body-heat loss caused by wind. Wool, silk, or polypropylene inner layers of clothing will hold more body heat than cotton. Most important, stay dry as wet clothing chills the body rapidly. Excess perspiration will increase heat loss, so individuals should remove extra layers of clothing whenever they feel too warm.

“If possible, stay inside during extremely cold weather,” said Dr. Duwve. “If you must go outside, be prepared by dressing in layers and having a blanket and hand warmers on hand in your car. If you get wet or start to shiver, take a break and go indoors.”

Do not ignore shivering,” warns Dr. Duwve. “It’s an important first sign that the body is losing heat. Persistent shivering is a signal to return indoors.”

State health officials urge Hoosiers to take precautions to ensure they are heating their home safely, including having a working carbon monoxide detector. Improper use of portable heating equipment can lead to fire or dangerous levels of carbon monoxide.

Tips for staying warm and safe while at home include:

- Use fireplace, wood stoves, or other combustion heaters only if they are properly vented to the outside;
- Never use a charcoal or gas grill indoors—the fumes are deadly;
- Never leave lit candles unattended;
- Keep as much heat as possible inside your home;
- Check the temperature in your home often during severely cold weather;
- Leave all water taps slightly open so they drip continuously; and
- Eat well-balanced meals to help you stay warmer.