

Cold weather advisory on hypothermia from NIA

This information was provided by HomeCare Options.

PATERSON - Hypothermia, as defined by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), occurs when the body can no longer maintain normal temperature due to exposure to cold conditions. The body loses heat faster than it can be produced.

According to Carol Mahler, a nurse practitioner of wellness services at HomeCare Options in Paterson, "Hypothermia slows down one's ability to think clearly and causes the body to move slowly and awkwardly."

The persons most susceptible to hypothermia include elderly people with inadequate food, clothing or heat; babies sleeping in cold bedrooms; adults under the influence of alcohol; mentally ill individuals; and people who remain outdoors for long periods such as the homeless, hikers and hunters. Individuals who suffer from disease or poor health conditions like diabetes, thyroid problems, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases are also at high risk for hypothermia.

The National Institute for Aging

(NIA) lists the following warning signs of hypothermia: cold hands, puffy or swollen face, pale skin, shivering, slower or slurred speech, sleepiness and confusion.

If individual with these symptoms is not given emergency medical attention, the person may experience slow, irregular heart-beat and slow, shallow breathing. There is also the danger of heart attacks, kidney problems and liver damage. In some cases, they may lose consciousness. Mahler recommends that a 911 call be made immediately whenever symptoms of hypothermia are suspected.

She advised, "Get the person into a warm room and wrap them in a warm blanket, until help arrives. Do not rub the arms and legs but rather immerse the person in hot water or apply a heating pad. Never give them alcoholic beverages to drink because alcohol can make the body lose heat faster."

To prevent hypothermia, Mahler recommends dressing warmly on cold days even if a person remains indoors. Set the heat

at 68 degrees. When going outside, wear loose layers of clothing and be sure to put on a hat, scarf and gloves. Do not stay in cold places for long periods of time. Maintain a healthy diet. Be sure to see the doctor to keep any chronic diseases under control. Avoid alcoholic beverages. Finally, persons who live alone should ask a neighbor to regularly check on their well being.

Mahler also suggested that those who have difficulty in managing the high cost of heating bills might want to seek financial assistance. The NIA provides a toll-free hotline to reach the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program at 1-866-674-6327.

HomeCare Options became a pioneer within the home care industry by offering wellness services to clients who are absent of disease or disability. The goal of its program, partially funded through grants provided by the Passaic County's Division on Aging, is to help people stay well longer so they won't need home care or nursing home care.