Skin deep: Prepping for winter

Outdoors

By John T. Unger

Hiking above timberline in Yankee Boy Basin last Saturday, the wind felt particularly cold.

Despite the full sun and cloudless blue sky at noon, the steady 20 mph winds confirmed that it really is the latter half of October.

In the swirling gusts that occasionally were much stronger, it felt more like winter than winter itself sometimes feels.

Down here in the valley towns, mid-autumn prompts us to give our greenery one last deep soaking prior to having our sprinklers blown out. Mulch is being piled around the bases of the rose bushes by all those who tend to them.

Whether it's the saddle horse in a pasture on Spring Creek Mesa or the red fox living in the brush on the edge of Baldridge Park, the bodies of mammals are beginning to adapt to the cooler temperatures in preparation for winter's onset. We too can take steps to feel warmer for outdoor activities from lift-served skiing to standing outdoors watching December's annual holiday parade down Main Street.

The coats on the red fox and the horse are becoming more dense due to the influence of cooler nights. The human body responds to day after day of increasingly colder air by increasing the thickness of a natural layer of fat just below the skin, all over the body. This subcutaneous fat layer insulates and holds in our body's core heat.

A big appeal of outdoor sports is the variable of changing weather. When weather is combined with mountainous terrain, of course, the variations in temperature from one minute to the next can become extreme. The unexpected wind can rapidly chill the unprepared on even sunny days.

Have you ever erred in predicting which gloves to take for a cold weather outing? It may have been for cross-country skiing, or perhaps only hiking in late fall or early winter, but if the wind kicked up and you were in your lighter weight gloves, you knew your error.

In such a situation, the normal body response to this cold stress is to lessen blood flow to our hands and to our feet. Blood carries heat. So less blood flow results in cold, and later, numb fingers and toes.

But by providing the body gradual and repeated daily exposures to low temperatures, each winter it can be retrained to provide more blood and warmth to fingers and toes after this initial period of lessened flow. This is an adaptation to cold exposures that is a natural phenomenon which we can promote and hasten.

Consider, for example, someone who works indoors during each weekday, and then drives in a heated vehicle to do their workout indoors. If he or she then chooses to ski or snowshoe just once a week on Saturday, there will likely be cold digits for many, many weeks into the winter.

On the other hand, this same person may instead choose to grab the leash and walk the dog in the cold night air each evening after dinner. During the brisk walk he or she can temporarily leave the gloves in the coat's pockets, exposing some of their hands or neck to the cold night air until really needed. Even 20 or 30 minutes of this type of controlled, frequent exposure can trigger a better cold accommodation for later benefit.

High above Yankee Boy Basin last weekend, Pam East covers up against the cold wind, with Telluride's famed St. Sophia Ridge in the background. (Submitted photo)

In this way the body gets trained to allow more blood flow to the periphery (hands and feet) than in an untrained person. Plus, it is prompted to deposit more of that subcutaneous fat described above.

By doing more vigorous exercise (rather than just walking) in cooler or cold air, people can further improve not only the amount of this blood flow, but also can increase how frequently the body produces this flow. The result is warmer fingers and toes.

Of course, before using these basic controlled exposures to cold air, some individuals may need to check first with their health care providers. For instance, this group would include those with weakened immune systems or active sinus infections.

Frostnip, non-freezing cold injury, and frostbite can all increase the chance of a repeat injury of those previously damaged areas. Most people who have had such an injury, even on a small area of their tissues, are already extra watchful in later cold weather outings.

A friendly opportunity exists for walkers, joggers, and runners who prefer a little bit of company during their outings. People gather at 9 a.m. each Saturday morning at the Looney Bean on South Townsend Avenue to do just that. At no cost, they go as short or as long along the river bike path as they wish, at each one's own pace.

Putting out a bit of effort now can make for warmer digits when the fun of skiing and sledding season arrives.

John T. Unger is a Diplomate of the American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians, with over twenty-five years of practice in Montrose. He looks forward to more winter backcountry adventures without numb digits. Ideas for future columns are welcomed at sportsdocunger.com.

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Carbon monoxide poses risks to campers

Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

A 28-year-old hunter from the Front Range died during this year's archery season from accidental carbon monoxide poisoning. He was hunting in the Taylor Park area and camped near Cottonwood Pass, in Gunnison County.

Gunnison County Coroner Frank Vader confirmed through an autopsy that the man died of carbon monoxide poisoning. He said that the hunter had two lanterns — one that burned propane, and an older model that used another type of fuel that was manually pumped into a chamber for burning.

It was speculated that the man used the lanterns for warmth in his tent, as the night before the temperature dropped to 19 degrees. When officials found the man the next morning, he was unresponsive and both lanterns were out of fuel.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission reported that in 2010 about 11 percent of all carbon monoxide deaths occurred inside tents and camping trailers.

As temperatures drop, campers tend to bring their fuel burning stoves, lanterns, heaters and grills inside with them. The result can be tragic.

Carbon monoxide is emitted when a fuel, such as propane is burned. Carbon monoxide is odorless and colorless and very difficult to detect. A person who inhales it can very quickly suffer from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning can often resemble that of a cold or flu.

You should pay special attention if someone complains of headache, dizziness, weakness, sleepiness, nausea, or general confusion. A person who exhibits any of these symptoms should be treated immediately or death can occur.

The treatment calls for a very quick response. Immediately turn off the appliance and open all the doors, windows, tent flap, depending on what area in which the victim is enclosed.

A lantern like this is common around a campsite, but bringing it into your tent can turn deadly. (Submitted photo)

The idea is to ventilate the area thoroughly. It is important to leave the area and seek fresh air. The victim should be transported to an emergency medical facility as soon as possible.

When you are camping during the colder months, here are a few important tips to consider:

• Fuel burning equipment, such as lanterns, grills and heaters should not be used in tents, campers or other enclosed areas.

• Opening tent flaps, doors or windows does not allow adequate ventilation of carbon monoxide.

• Stay away from heaters. Use proper bedding and clothing to provide warmth.

• If you use a generator, be certain to run it far away from your enclosed areas.

• Carbon monoxide poisoning risk increase with altitude.

Folks who use a camper with built in heating and cooking appliances should follow these additional tips:

• Make sure you have a working carbon monoxide alarm.

• Have your heating and cooking systems thoroughly inspected prior to camping season and after traveling long distances. Fuel lines and fittings can sometimes work loose.

• Adjust all pilot lights, ovens, stoves, lamps and heaters at the start of each trip. A yellow flame indicates improper adjustment and the potential for excessive carbon monoxide.

• Never use a camper oven as a source of heat as most camper ovens have no exterior vent.

• Remember that liquefied petroleum is heavier than air. A leak in the system will cause the gas to settle near the floor, where any open flame or spark can cause a flash fire.

• Be sure you have adequate cross ventilation in the camper. You should never rely on roof vents alone.

The cooler fall months are a terrific time to be camping in the mountains of western Colorado. Be certain that with the cooler temperatures you operate your fuel burning appliances wisely. Until next time, see you on the trail.

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