

The dangers of exposure

By far, the major cause of death for victims lost in the mountains is exposure. Exposure is just another name for hypothermia. To put it simply, hypothermia is the loss of body



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

heat faster than it is being produced, causing a drop in the body's inner-core temperature. Usually, hypothermia results from the loss of the body's store of nutrients in a situation where the victim is subjected to severe chilling. It does not have to be below freezing to occur as there have been deaths recorded when the temperature never dropped below the 50's.

Most cases of hypothermia involve the victim getting wet. Clothes lose up to 90 percent of their insulation value when wet. There are a few products, such as wool, that retain a fair amount of insulation value, but most become depleted.

Add wind to the mix and you have all the ingredients for a visit from old Murphy. Wind will drive cold air over, under and through wet clothes. The evaporating moisture quickly cools and refrigerates the wet skin.

The cold will affect the body very slowly and subtly. It happens so slowly that the victim is completely unaware that mental effects are taking place. These effects will include memory loss, clumsiness (more than I usually have), loss of coordination and errors in judgment.

Those of us who spend lots of time outdoors, including first responders, have had hypothermia drilled into their heads. Some of us go out with the thought that it will not get us. I was one of those people until I had a close call on a recent hunt in Canada.

I was out in an all-day long downpour of rain and steady, cold winds. Temperatures were hovering in the upper 30's to low 40's. Because of the cold, I wore several layers of



(Top) Snowmobiling in the mountains require very warm clothing to prevent hypothermia or exposure. (Bottom) Winter is a beautiful time to hike in the mountains. Be certain to bring multiple layers of clothing and guard against perspiration. (Submitted photo/Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

warm clothes, topped off with a full set, pants and jacket, and rain gear. The gear I had was pretty good quality, and I thought I was fine for the 14 hour day.

We hiked up and down the terrain for 8 to 14 miles daily, toting a 40-pound pack and a rifle. The clothes kept me dry from the ever-present rain but I was completely soaked on the inside from perspiration.

Every time we stopped to glass, I got just a little bit colder. My mild shivering was turning into a heavy shiver. Problem was, I never paid it much attention, and denied the possibility of hypothermia. Fortunately, the guide was aware of my progressing condition and set me up with a roaring campfire in the shelter of some trees, which gave me a chance to eat, recover, and dry out.

Hypothermia has three stages.

Stage one is uncontrollable shivering which is the body trying to generate heat and maintain a normal temperature. This stage will last until the body runs out of nutrients, such as sugars and starch.

Stage two is when the shivering stops, as the body no longer has the necessary fuels to produce heat. This is the stage where the mental symptoms will appear and the victim will not be motivated to save him/herself.

Stage three is unconsciousness and death. This stage will follow stage two in a matter of minutes.

If the hypothermia is at stage one start re-warming the victim immediately by trying to trap the body heat generated by shivering. Get them out of the wind and rain and to the best shelter available. Give them food and water and remove any wet clothing. Dry the

skin to prevent further evaporation. If the person does not show immediate signs of improvement, evacuate them immediately to a medical facility.

Stage two hypothermia is a medical emergency requiring immediate evacuation to a hospital. You will want to package the patient and apply heat, concentrating on the thorax. Medical heat packs work best for this if they are available. Give them nothing by mouth and keep the airway open. Be aware that moving a person in severe hypothermia can cause the heart to stop. It is best to leave the evacuation to trained medical personnel.

While waiting for rescuers, you can put two warm people, one on either side of the patient, inside the wrap you have around them. This puts much additional body heat directly to the patient. Never put the victim into a cold sleeping bag, as they have no ability to warm it themselves.

Like every danger we face in the outdoors, prevention is the best treatment. Dress warmly and in layers. Add a layer or two when inactive and remove them when you are physically active. Never allow perspiration to build up, as you will become cold later. You can always stop and make a fire and a shelter. Address your cold feeling early, before it becomes a problem. Keep your body full of good foods and water as you burn many extra calories in the cold.

Like most problems encountered outdoors, prevention is the key. For hypothermia, remember the three Ws. Dress for warmth, wind and wet conditions.

It is hard to imagine something like this can happen to you, but it can. It happens so subtly, you may never notice the symptoms, and if you do, you may deny it. I am glad I did not have Murphy as a hunting guide on that trip. Sometimes when the bell tolls, it is not always a collect call for you.

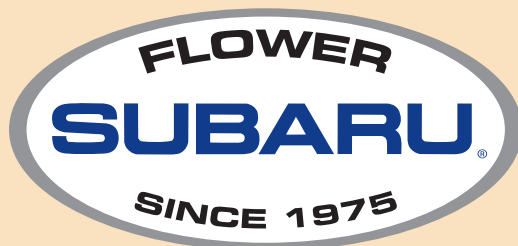
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The Great Outdoors Expo is a two-day celebration that includes exciting exhibits and fun activities for outdoor enthusiasts of all ages. The expo exhibitors will feature hunting and fishing gear, wildlife art, gifts, bikes, golf equipment, books, outdoor apparel, camping equipment, Kayaks, boats, recreational vehicles, game calls and more. This event is being heavily marketed to outdoor enthusiasts locally and throughout the Four Corners. Be sure to register early!

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