

SecondsCount Survival Guide

Protecting Your Heart When It Gets Really Cold

When temperatures drop, the heart has to work harder to help maintain your body's core temperature. In fact, according to the American Heart Association, heart failure is the cause of most deaths from **hypothermia** - a dangerous condition in which the body's temperature falls below normal.

While researchers aren't exactly sure why, cold temperatures increase **heart attack** risk, too. Part of the reason might be that walking through heavy snow or lifting shovels full of snow can be unexpectedly strenuous work for anyone who only does those tasks occasionally. Some researchers think cold weather may influence the human body in other ways (such as hormones or blood vessel constriction) to also increase the likelihood of a heart attack.

Very cold weather is particularly dangerous for people with heart disease. This applies to babies and young children with complex **congenital heart conditions** as well.

Even if you do not have known heart disease, be sure to bundle up with layers of clothes when going outside, wear a hat to reduce heat loss from your head, and to go slowly when shoveling or doing other physically challenging tasks. If you know you have heart disease, the same warnings apply, but much more strongly. Before cold weather strikes, ask your doctor about safe levels of exposure to the cold and which activities should be left to someone without heart disease.

Symptoms to Watch For

Hypothermia and heart attack are both medical emergencies. If you suspect either, **dial 9-1-1 immediately.**

Heart attack symptoms

- **Chest discomfort:** Many heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness, or pain.
- **Discomfort in other areas of the upper body:** Symptoms can include pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw, or stomach.
- **Shortness of breath** with or without chest discomfort.
- **Breaking out in a cold sweat**
- **Feeling nauseous or lightheaded**

Keep in mind: **Not all people with heart attacks experience chest pain.** Be on the alert for *all* of the symptoms of heart attack.

Hypothermia symptoms

- Exhaustion or drowsiness
- Shivering
- Confusion
- Memory loss
- Slurred speech
- Fumbling hands

Heart Attack Survival Guide

Recognizing the symptoms of a heart attack is step 1 for survival, but there's more to know. When a heart attack strikes, **seconds really do count**. If you have symptoms of a heart attack that come on suddenly and last for more than a few minutes (even if they come and go), or you feel terrible and different than you ever have before when experiencing indigestion, anxiety, or stress, here's what you must do:

1. **Get help immediately. Call 911.** Tell the 911 operator, "I think I'm having a heart attack." Or if you're calling for someone else, communicate the same thing about him or her.
2. **Do not drive yourself to the hospital.** Leave the driving to emergency personnel. You must be transported and receive treatment as quickly as possible, perhaps even while you are en route to the hospital. The emergency responders in the ambulance will notify the interventional cardiologist that you are coming. They'll have the **cardiac catheterization laboratory** ready for an interventional procedure, such as **angioplasty and stenting**.
3. **Don't be afraid to repeat yourself.** When you talk to the 911 operator, the paramedics, and any other healthcare professionals, **say "I think I'm having a heart attack."** This is especially important because **heart attack symptoms in women** are sometimes milder and are sometimes more easily dismissed, even by healthcare professionals.
4. **Don't let anyone talk you out of what you believe your body is telling you.** Don't hesitate to request a thorough cardiac examination.

If the healthcare professionals determine you are having a heart attack, they will move swiftly to get you treated. In most cases, this means getting to a hospital where **interventional cardiologists** are on call 24/7 to treat heart attacks and other emergencies. The interventional cardiologists and their teams will take you to the cardiac catheterization laboratory, where they will use small tubes called **catheters** to locate the artery in your heart where blood isn't flowing freely. Once they've found the blocked artery, they'll inflate a tiny balloon on the tip of the catheter to push aside the material blocking blood flow to your heart. This procedure, called **angioplasty** (or percutaneous coronary intervention), has been shown to be the most effective therapy for saving lives during a heart attack.

We can't repeat it often enough. **In a heart attack, seconds count.** You may have heard the expression "time is muscle." This refers to the time that elapses between when a heart attack starts and when the interventional cardiologist restores blood flow to the heart. During that time, the heart muscle is in peril, which means your life is in danger.

This is why it is so important to recognize the symptoms of a heart attack, take them seriously, and seek help promptly.