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It's Time to Bundle Up

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Bitter cold is expected to sweep through the region this weekend, and local officials are cautioning residents to take the necessary precautions to ensure their safety. National Weather Service meteorologist Melissa Gould said sub-zero temperatures will envelop the area Sunday night and the cold will continue into Monday, when temperatures are expected to climb only to about 8 degrees.

In addition to making boilers work overtime, and knocking out weak car batteries, the intense cold can be dangerous to people's health.

Dr. Bonnie Ryan, head of the Emergency Department at HealthAlliance Hospital in Leominster, said cold weather can do a number on the human body.

She said the emergency department often treats individuals for minor injuries related to the cold, including frostbite on people who ski and snow-shoe. But the hospital also treats people suffering from more serious weather-related issues such as hypothermia.

"When someone is hypothermic, that's more serious. Their body can't make heat as quickly as it's losing it," explained Ryan.

Early symptoms include shivering as the body tries to make heat, and as the body becomes colder, it stops shivering all together, she said. Without medical treatment, hypothermia can leave the skin cold and pale, and cause the brain to stop working properly, resulting in slurred speech and dizziness.

In worst-case scenarios, victims become stiff, their pulses slow, their breathing becomes shallow and they may become comatose, Ryan said.

If you have to go outside during the deep freeze, wear layers of clothing, Ryan said, adding, "Layered clothing keeps moisture out."

Ryan said the extreme cold also affects the elderly more seriously. Everyone should use caution if they're doing outdoor physical activities during the extreme cold, such as snow removal.

According to Ryan, 11,000 adults and children are sent to the hospital every year as a result of shoveling accidents, with the majority involving back problems, head injuries and heart attacks.

"A heart attack usually occurs in adults over age 55 and is four times more likely to occur while shoveling. The cold weather increases the risk for heart attack due to constriction of blood vessels," she said. "If you are experiencing chest pain or shortness of breath during shoveling, stop immediately."

Fitchburg police Lt. Kevin O'Brien said police are conscious of Fitchburg's homeless population, especially when the weather is unusually cold.

"We try to do the best we can when the weather is that cold," he said. "The officers on the street are constantly checking in on them. If they need a shelter, we try to get them into **Our Father's House**. We try to do the best we can with what we have. It happens all the time. Sometimes we can't force them to come inside. We'll try different agencies, like the Red Cross. If it gets too cold, we'll bring them here (to the station) and let them warm up and try to get them some food."

On Friday afternoon, the state Fire Marshal's office issued a statement urging people to take precautions when heating their homes during the cold weather.

"This weekend will tax our heating and electrical systems as we try to stay warm, so a little caution can help you make it safely through the extreme weather," state Fire Marshal Stephen Coan said. "Keep thermostats set at the lowest comfortable temperature as furnaces may struggle to keep the house warm; wear warm clothes and put an extra blanket on the bed."

Space heaters are also a major concern for Coan, saying that one in every seven space-heater fires in the past five years has resulted in a fatality.

If you must use a space heater, Coan strongly urges residents to use them in a 3-foot circle of safety, free of anything else that could potentially catch fire. He said space heaters should never be used as a main heat source.

He also urged people to properly dispose of ashes from fireplaces and wood stoves by placing them in metal containers and moving them several feet away from their homes.

Carbon-monoxide poisoning is also a major threat this weekend, Coan said.

"Carbon monoxide poisoning is a great risk at times like these," he said. "Heating appliances are the leading cause of carbon monoxide in the home and the risk increases as they are working harder. Don't use your oven for heat and don't bring a hibachi or gas grill inside to cook. Doing so can cause carbon monoxide poisoning."