

Frostbite

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



What is frostbite?

Frostbite is the term used for frozen skin and tissues below the skin. It can happen when skin freezes from exposure to extremely cold weather or water. Skin/tissue that is affected by frostbite must be handled carefully to prevent permanent damage. All but the most mild frostbite cases require medical attention.

People can more easily develop frostbite if they drink excessive amounts of alcohol, don't dress warmly enough for the cold or have medical conditions that affect blood flow to their skin (such as diabetes).



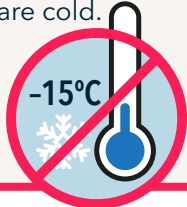
Watch carefully for signs of frostbite on body parts that are commonly exposed to the cold: cheeks, nose, ears, hands, fingers, feet, toes.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PREVENT FROSTBITE IN COLD WEATHER?

- Wear layers of warm clothing, a hat, scarf and gloves. Wind and high humidity increase the risk of frostbite; always consider wind chill when going out into the cold for longer periods of time.
- Do not go outside if you have been drinking alcohol or using recreational drugs, as this may make you less aware that you are cold.
- Avoid being out in the extreme cold (below -15°C) for extended periods of time. Go indoors to warm up whenever possible.



- Keep hands and feet dry and replace wet socks and gloves.
- Use chemical hand and foot warmers or warm hands by placing them under your armpits.
- Watch carefully for signs of frostbite after being outside in extreme cold weather. **Do not** rub the area, as this can cause more damage.



Watch for:

- Stiffness, numbness or tingling in any body part
- Skin that looks pale or discoloured

WHAT TO DO IF FROSTBITE IS SUSPECTED:

- Remove any wet clothing from the frostbitten area. Cover the area with dry clothing and get indoors or to a warmer area as soon as possible.
- Remove jewellery and tight clothing from the frostbitten area, as swelling may occur while thawing.
- Rewarm the frostbitten area by placing it in warm water (not hot) or applying warm compresses for 30–60 minutes. **Do not** rub the area while it is under water. If warm water is not available, wrap the area gently in warm blankets or tuck it into the underarm, groin or against



- the abdomen. Continue rewarming the skin until it returns to its normal colour and feels warm and soft.
- After rewarming, raise the affected area above the level of the heart to prevent swelling.
- Separate toes and fingers, if affected, with dry gauze.
- If blisters develop, do not break them, as they help protect the skin from infection. If blisters break on their own, cover them with clean, dry gauze.
- If transporting another person with frostbite, wrap them in a soft, loosely fitting blanket.



- It is normal to feel pain and tingling when the frostbitten area is thawed. Nonprescription pain relievers such as ibuprofen can help, as they will decrease inflammation and possibly prevent further damage.



Seek emergency medical care

if numbness, tingling or pain are still present 24 hours after thawing or if there are any signs of infection such as swollen or hot skin, fever or pus.



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WHAT **NOT** TO DO IF FROSTBITE IS SUSPECTED:

- **Do not** rewarm the frostbitten area if there is any risk of it refreezing.
- **Do not** rub or massage frostbitten skin (even to dry it) or put snow on it, as this can cause more damage.
- **Do not** place the frostbitten area near direct heat, such as a fire or heating pad, as this can cause a burn.
- **Do not** smoke cigarettes or use any nicotine products, as nicotine can constrict the blood vessels and lead to more damage.

In mild frostbite, the skin will return to its normal colour and feel warm and soft after thawing. Blisters with clear or milky fluid may appear within 24 to 48 hours but the skin underneath them should be soft and warm.



What are the signs of serious frostbite?

Serious frostbite can be hard to notice. Some signs of serious frostbite include:

- Skin that feels hard, waxy and cold, even after it has thawed or been rewarmed.
- Skin that has colour changes after it has thawed or been rewarmed: deep red or purple in lightly pigmented skin or dark purple/brown/black in darkly pigmented skin.
- Blisters that are a dark colour (filled with blood).
- Having a hard time moving the parts of the body that have been affected. Frostbite in the hands or feet may lead to clumsiness or difficulty gripping objects.



If serious frostbite is suspected, or if you are not sure, go to an emergency department as soon as possible.