



Media Release

Protecting Mississauga's Vulnerable from the Perils of Cold Weather

January 5, 2010, MISSISSAUGA – A day out of doors in the fresh winter air can turn an enjoyable activity like making a snowman, tobogganing or skiing, dangerous, if you or a family member is unprepared or without the proper protection. Do you know what to do if a friend begins to shiver violently, his pupils are dilated or her actions become irrational?

“St. John Ambulance would like to make sure that everyone has a safe and warm winter,” says Dianne Rende, Director, Mississauga Branch. “Without sufficient protection from the elements and with prolonged exposure to low temperatures, wind or moisture, serious cold-related illnesses such as frostbite and hypothermia can result.”

It's important to know that hypothermia can begin even at 20 degrees Celsius. Children and the elderly are especially at risk. It is not the severity of the cold, but the length of the exposure that causes the symptoms.

“Prevention is the best defence,” reminds Rende, “Check the weather forecast before going outdoors, dress appropriately, make sure that you have clothing for rain or snow, that friends know where you are going and that you have a good supply of high-energy foods, drink lots of liquids while avoiding alcohol and caffeine and keep moving to generate heat.”

Frostbite is the most common injury resulting from overexposure to cold temperatures. There are two stages of frostbite – superficial and deep. At the superficial level, the frostbite affects the top surface layer of the skin. This may cause a mild sense of numbness or pain and the skin will appear white, waxy and firm to the touch. Below the tissue is still soft. Deep frostbite is a serious condition, which will require immediate first aid. The tissue below the surface becomes frozen. The affected area will appear cold and hard, there will be complete lack of feeling, and the skin will appear waxy and eventually turn a grayish-blue as the frostbite progresses.

Hypothermia occurs when the body's temperature drops more than 2 degrees below the body's core temperature of 37° Celsius. Although more common to happen in very cold temperatures, it can also occur when the temperature is above zero – especially if wind and water (rain, sweat or submersion in cold water) are factors. Signs and symptoms include shivering (typically the first sign although it will cease as hypothermia worsens), feeling cold, slurred speech and inability to think clearly, pale skin and bluish lips, slowed pulse, confusion, the feeling of wanting to sleep (which may lead to unconsciousness), irritation/moodiness, withdrawn or disinterested states.

In either case, get medical help as soon as possible and prevent further loss of body heat by keeping the person warm and moving to a protected area. For frostbite, avoid further damage – do not walk on injured feet. Gradually re-warm the affected area with warm water, breath or by placing under the armpits or groin. Gently dry, elevate and keep warm. Hypothermia requires the removal or if not possible, the addition of clothing to insulate the casualty. For mild cases, some warm liquids may be given. Avoid caffeine, alcohol and tobacco as these can increase heat loss. Do not rub the body to improve circulation – this will cause cold blood flow back to the body core and cool the body further. Warm a casualty only if medical aid is unavailable by placing near a heat source and placing containers of warm water in contact with the skin (neck, armpits and groin).

In first aid and CPR training, St. John Ambulance is widely recognized as the industry leader with its proven combination of expert trainers, personalized instruction, and teaching aids. Enjoy a safe season with life-saving skills and products from St. John Ambulance. Contact the Mississauga Branch for more information.

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*St. John Ambulance is dedicated to improving the health and the safety
of the community through training and community service.*

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