

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of December 12, 2011 Christmas Time and Cold Weather

It's the most wonderful time of the year!! While some people love the warm weather and lying on the beach, and still others love getting out in the open to hike during the spring months, this time of the year is truly special. Even the hustle and bustle we must endure as we go about our business visiting shopping malls, book stores, sporting supply companies, fighting for parking spaces and getting frustrated at the traffic which typifies this holiday season, there is still something special in the air. If anyone has ever been to New York City during this time of year, you know exactly what I mean. New Yorkers, known for their brashness and no-nonsense way of giving directions to visitors or just allowing others to listen to their point-of-view, which is often interpreted as typical city rudeness - yes, even New Yorkers, seem to have a lilt in their walk and a glow in their eyes as they parade about 5th Avenue and window shop at all the things being presented in such dazzling displays.

As the Christmas song says, "Oh the weather outside is frightful," it does get cold this time of the year, and unless you live in some tropical location like, say the Amazon, you need to take precautions to keep warm (of course if you live in the Amazon then you have to contend with piranhas and insects that are the size of helicopters). So while you are out shopping or spending time on the slopes, it is important to keep in mind that this is the time of the year where we are most susceptible to cold weather conditions.

Cold weather shouldn't present any serious problems if you protect yourself and are in reasonably good health. If you have heart problems, however, ask your doctor if it is okay for you to brave cold weather -- even if he or she has already given your walking program the go-ahead.

The reason for this precaution is that low temperatures place a stress on the cardiovascular system. Typical reactions to cold weather include constriction of blood vessels in the skin, shallow breathing through the mouth, and slight thickening of the blood; all of which can lead indirectly to angina (chest pain) in people with heart disease. In addition, cold lowers the heart's supply of blood, while exertion raises the demand for it. This imbalance between supply and demand is the reason for experiencing chest pains.

Even for people who don't have heart disease, cold exposure can raise blood pressure. To conserve heat, the muscles contract to obstruct the flow of blood to the arms and legs. This reroutes extra blood to the vital organs and boosts the blood pressure while reducing blood to the extremities. This can lead to frost bite if one does not dress warmly. Typical symptoms of frostbite include numbness, tingling or stinging, aching, and bluish or pail, waxy skin, usually at the fingers and toes. Frostbite can permanently damage body tissue, and severe cases can lead to amputation.

Asthma is another condition that can worsen in the winter. Inhaling cold, dry winter air can trigger bronchospasms -- contractions of the air passages in the lungs. To avoid this, many doctors advise their asthmatic patients to take their anti-asthma medications just before they exert themselves. If you have asthma, see your doctor before you walk in cold weather.

Also at special risk in the cold are people with Raynaud's disease, which often accompanies connective tissue diseases such as scleroderma and lupus. Cold causes spasms in their blood vessels, which cut off the circulation to their fingers and toes and turn their skin a "chalky" color. These people are advised to exercise indoors during cold weather.

In the United States, about 700 deaths occur each year from hypothermia. Hypothermia occurs when your body temperature drops to 95 degrees F (35 degrees C) or less and can be fatal if it is not detected promptly and treated properly. While hypothermia can happen to anyone, the elderly run the highest risk because their bodies often do not adjust to changes in temperature quickly and they may be unaware that they are gradually getting colder. The first signs of hypothermia, one will feel cold, shiver, and seem socially withdrawn. As the condition worsens, you can become confused, sleepy, and slur your speech. In the most severe stage, the heart can slow down dangerously. To prevent hypothermia, wear warm, multi-layered clothing with good hand and feet protection and a warm hat or hood. If you notice symptoms, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends seeking medical attention immediately. If medical attention is not available, remove any clothing that's wet, and wrap up in a warm blanket to prevent further heat loss. Warm beverages may help increase the body temperature, but do not drink alcoholic beverages. **Also, do not take a hot shower or bath, because it can cause shock.**

Aside from hypothermia, winter time has been known to be flu season. Each year, adults get an average of about three colds every year, and 1 in 5 adults will get the flu. Although colds and flu aren't specific to cold-weather months, they're both more prevalent during winter. One study suggests that cold temperatures can actually lead to a cold by limiting the supply of infection-fighting white blood cells in the nasal passage, where cold viruses most often enter the body. And research shows that the flu virus is more stable and stays in the air longer when air is cold and dry.

The Holiday season is wonderful. It should always be a time happiness and joy. By just taking a few precautions, you can prevent the cold from placing a damper on everything that we all look forward to in this time of the year.

**In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay
an invincible summer.**

Albert Camus (French author & philosopher)