

How can I protect myself in winter storms?

Winter storms are considered deceptive killers because most winter storm deaths are related only indirectly to the storms. Overall, most winter storm deaths result from vehicle or other transportation accidents caused by ice and snow. You should avoid driving when conditions include sleet, freezing rain or drizzle, snow, or dense fog. These are serious conditions that are often underestimated, and they make driving—and even walking outside—very hazardous.

Exhaustion and heart attacks brought on by overexertion are two other common causes of deaths related to winter storms. Cold temperatures compound the strain of physical labor on a person's body. Tasks such as shoveling snow, pushing a vehicle, or even walking in heavy snow can cause a heart attack, particularly in people who are older or not used to high levels of physical activity. Before tackling strenuous tasks in cold temperatures, you should carefully consider your physical condition, the weather factors, and the nature of the task. If you are not sure how much you can safely do, you should avoid all heavy work in cold temperatures.

You should also dress to protect yourself from frostbite and hypothermia. When outside in cold temperatures, wear warm, loose-fitting, lightweight clothing in several layers. If you get too warm, you can remove one or more layers and if you get too cold you can add layers, so you can avoid the sweat-chills cycle. Your outer garments should be tightly woven, water repellent, and have a hood. Wear a hat. Half of your body heat can be lost from your head. Mittens, snug at the wrist, are better than gloves. Try to stay dry. If it is extremely cold, cover your mouth to protect your lungs.

If, during severe cold, your home loses power or heat, go to a designated public shelter. For information on designated shelters, contact your local emergency management office or American Red Cross chapter.

Home fires occur more frequently in the winter because people do not take the proper safety precautions when using alternative heating sources. Be sure all heating sources are installed according to local codes and permit requirements. To protect yourself, be sure that you never leave a fire unattended, that you dispose of ashes properly and only after they are completely cold, and that you operate and position space heaters only according to the manufacturer's instructions. Use only space heaters approved by an independent testing laboratory. Fire during winter storms is exceptionally dangerous because conditions may make it difficult for firefighters to get to the fire, and the water needed to fight the fire may be frozen.

In addition, every winter people are killed by carbon monoxide (CO) emitted by fuels they are using to heat their homes. Never operate unvented fuel-burning appliances in any closed room or where people are sleeping. CO poisoning from fuel-burning appliances kills people each year in the United States. Never use gas appliances such as ranges, ovens, or clothes dryers to heat your home. Do not use charcoal grills indoors or in attached garages.

Never use a portable generator in an enclosed or partially enclosed space, including in your home, or in a garage, basement, crawl space, or other partially enclosed area, even with ventilation. Opening doors and windows or using fans will not prevent CO buildup. Locate a portable generator outdoors and away from doors, windows, and vents that could allow CO to come indoors. Portable generators can produce high levels of deadly CO very quickly. In addition to producing toxic engine exhaust, portable generators can cause electric shock or electrocution and fire. (See Appendix: Portable Generators.)