

Frostbite



What is frostbite?

Frostbite is damage to the skin from exposure to cold weather. It is extremely painful and can lead to problems like amputation. Many people think that British Columbia does not get cold enough for people to get frostbite in the winter, but we are seeing longer periods of dangerously cold weather than we are used to. Frostbite can happen at temperature around zero degrees.

Look for the 4 “P”s of frostbite

Pink

Affected areas are reddish in colour.
This is the first sign of frostbite.

Pain

Affected areas become painful.

Patches

Pale, waxy feeling patches show up.
This is where skin is dying.

Prickles

These areas will then feel numb and prickly.

Who is at risk?

Anyone is vulnerable when the temperature gets low, but these are people who are more likely to get frostbite:

- People who are unhoused, who lack shelter, who lack proper clothing
- People who might be using drugs or alcohol which can impair ability to sense temperature
- The elderly and the very young as their bodies are less able to adapt to cold
- People with certain conditions including diabetes and Raynaud’s phenomenon
- People taking medication that constricts blood vessels such as beta-blockers
- Outside workers who do not have the right equipment
- Sport enthusiasts such as hikers or skiers

Frostnip usually happens before frostbite sets in. Frostnip starts with cold skin, prickling and burning feeling, slight numbness, and red skin. When it progresses to frostbite, the skin becomes completely numb, feels waxy, is very pale, and can change colour after re-warming. There can be severe pain, swelling, and fever.

If you know someone who is vulnerable or you work with people who are at risk in cold weather, always be on the lookout for signs of hypothermia and frostbite.

If you think someone might have frostbite, call 8-1-1 for advice. If you think frostbite looks more severe, get medical care right away. If you suspect hypothermia, call 9-1-1.



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Tips to prevent frostbite



Get to a warm area before frostbite sets in. If it is too cold outside, consider staying indoors.



Wear waterproof winter boots with room for an extra layer of socks. Wear 2 pairs of socks. Wool is best.



Keep extra mittens and gloves in the car, house, or school bag. Wear larger sized mittens over your gloves.



Make sure you are able to wiggle your toes in your boots. This air space around your toes acts as insulation.



Wear a hat. Make sure it fully covers your ears.



Try not to drink alcohol if you plan to be outside. Alcohol can cause your body to lose heat faster.



Wear a neck warmer to protect your chin, lips and cheeks. These areas are all extremely vulnerable to frostbite.



Plan to protect yourself. Carry emergency supplies and warm clothes. Let others know your travel plans.

If you see signs of frostbite

- Do not rub or massage the areas. This can cause more damage.
- Do not put heat on the areas. Instead, warm up the area slowly. Use warm compresses or your own body heat to re-warm the area. You can place your fingers in your armpits.
- If toes or feet are frostbitten, try not to walk on them.
- Frostnip can usually be treated with first aid, but frostbite requires medical care. Get medical care right away if you notice any of these signs in areas: pale or grey coloured patches, numbness, increasing pain, swelling, fluid draining.
- Do not rewarm a frostbitten area if you can't continue to keep it warm. It can cause more damage if it re-freezes a second time.
- Watch for signs of hypothermia.



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