

STAYING WELL THIS WINTER

Low temperatures and short days produce a variety of physical, psychological and infectious hazards which can impact on our wellbeing and our health and safety.

As well as increasing the chances of slips and falls, cold winter weather can cause problems by lowering body temperature, which increases the risk of heart attacks, strokes and breathing difficulties amongst vulnerable individuals.

The winter months see an increased level of upper respiratory tract and in particular viral infections, including influenza. The symptoms of flu are more severe than a common cold or upper respiratory infection. Every few years there are epidemics of flu within the UK, though we are not currently anticipating such an epidemic in 2006/7. Flu however can spread rapidly through families and through employees working in enclosed environments, particularly through coughing and sneezing.

The common symptoms are high fever, headache, sore throat, coughing and pains in the joints and muscles particularly in the back and limbs. With the normal temperature for an adult being approximately 36°C, should you find your temperature is higher than this combined with developing symptoms which may include becoming alternatively hot and cold, headaches and pains in the joints and muscles, consider taking a pain killer such as Paracetamol. In addition, take time to rest and drink plenty of non alcoholic liquid and keep warm (though do not give Aspirin to children under 12 years of age).

Do I need to see my GP?

This is a very common question. Most people who are otherwise fit and healthy do not need to seek the advice of their General Practitioner. Usually one or possibly two days of rest, taking care to control the temperature as detailed above and taking plenty of fluids, will manage the most severe symptoms. Those individuals who suffer from chest or heart problems, diabetes or kidney problems however should inform their GP. In certain individuals, flu can produce complications such as bronchitis or other chest infections and further medical from the GP may need to be sought in this circumstance.

You should contact your GP if:

1. you continue to run a persistent temperature for more than 48 hours
2. your condition generally deteriorates
3. you develop persistent, severe headaches associated with vomiting
4. you develop chest pain or shortness of breath

Flu is not usually a serious illness, but continued fatigue and low mood can persist for several weeks after a bout of flu. However it is important to return to a normal routine, interacting with family, friends and colleagues as quickly as possible.

How do I avoid passing an airborne infection to others?

Frequently and thoroughly washing of hands will help avoid spreading viral infections, such as a cough or cold, using fresh tissues and disposing of these considerately.

It is wise to stock up on over-the-counter remedies such as Paracetamol, Neurofen, Lemsip or other proprietary remedies to tackle coughs and colds.

Try to follow as healthy a lifestyle as possible through the winter months. The amount we eat, drink and the amount of exercise taken can make a big difference.

A balanced diet is fundamental to good health at any time of year, but particularly so during the winter. Stock up on food from each of the 5 groups:

1. bread, cereals, potato, pasta, chapatti
2. fresh fruit and vegetables
3. milk and dairy products
4. meat, fish, eggs and pulses (such as beans)
5. food containing fat and sugar

Likewise, staying active is good for our health, whatever the time of year. Moderate exercise, for example walking, can be most beneficial. If you have an exercise routine, try to maintain this throughout the winter. This not only keeps you warm, but improves circulation and muscle tone.

Reassessing your wardrobe for winter is also important. Wear several thin layers of clothing, this traps body heat better than one thick layer. Clothes made from wool,



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cotton or fleecy synthetic fibres are best. When out and about, consider the amount of heat lost through the head. Wear a hat or a headscarf. To keep feet warm and to avoid slips, trips and falls wear flat, dry, warm, non slips shoes or boots.

Hypothermia

This is a condition whereby the body becomes dangerously cold. Hypothermia can be caused by brief exposure to extreme cold or prolonged exposure to mild, cold and wet. This condition is a particular concern for individuals who might be prone to falls or to collapse. Speedy treatment is vital as hypothermia can be fatal.

The danger signs are:

- Cold skin, even under clothes, for example across the stomach or under the arms
- Drowsiness and slurred speech.
- Loss of sensation

It is important to call an ambulance immediately, dial 999. Try to warm the person up gradually by warming the room, or providing a warm drink, do not offer alcohol or try to warm an individual quickly. Likewise hot drinks should not be given.

We hope this information helps you keep warm and well this winter. Further information with regards to useful websites on health issues can be found at www.phcohealth.com

