

HEALTH IMPACTS OF THE WINTER SEASON: INFORMATION FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH PARTNERS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

The winter season increases the risk of adverse health outcome due to cold, snowfall, flooding and power outages during winter storms. This year, the prolonged summer drought may have weakened trees and may result in more windfall during winter storms, increasing risks of injury and power outages. The effects of drought and wildfire on vegetation and run-off may have also increased the risk of floods and landslides during winter rain events.

Who is most at risk during the winter season?

At-risk Groups	Cold	Power Outages	Flooding & Landslides
Those experiencing homelessness	❄️		❄️
Those living in marginal housing or experiencing energy poverty	❄️	❄️	
Those living on floodplains, beside streams, on alluvial fans, or at the base of burned slopes			❄️
Those who live alone or are socially isolated	❄️	❄️	❄️
Those with limited mobility	❄️	❄️	❄️
Those who use substances	❄️	❄️	❄️
Those who depend on electric medical devices		❄️	❄️
Those who spend a lot of time outdoors (working, recreating or driving)	❄️		❄️
Those with certain medical conditions (e.g., diabetes, peripheral neuropathy)	❄️		
Those taking certain medications (e.g., beta blockers)	❄️		

At-risk groups were identified from various sources, including [HealthLinkBC](#) and Prepared BC's [emergency guides and resources](#).

What kinds of health impacts might we see during the winter seasons?

Cold temperatures and storm conditions can [impact the health](#) of at-risk community members via:

- **[Trenchfoot](#)**: a non-freezing cold injury due to continuous exposure to cold and wet, resulting in tingling, itching, burning, or blistered feet that are prone to infection and require medical attention.

- **Frostbite:** occurs when exposed ears, fingers, toes, or cheeks begin to freeze and results in tingling, stinging, or aching followed by numbness and change in skin texture (firm, waxy, white, gray or yellow in color). Frostbite should be evaluated by a medical professional.
- **Hypothermia:** occurs when body heat is lost faster than it can be replaced, and can occur quickly during cold, wind, rain, or sudden immersion, or much more gradually in homes kept below 18°C, especially in older adults. Hypothermia is a medical emergency.
- Unsheltered people who camp in marginal areas may be vulnerable to rapidly rising flood waters, collapsing banks, or windfall from damaged or drought-weakened trees. They are also at risk of [fire, burns, and CO poisoning](#) when using fuel-burning devices to heat enclosures. You can reduce these risks by creating **outdoor designated camping areas** with basic services to bring people away from danger zones and into closer contact with support services.

In the event of a flood, the community should be aware of the many [hazards within the impact zone](#):

- Drownings, often when trying to cross moving water on foot or in vehicles;
- Electrical hazards when equipment inside or outside the home is submerged;
- Respiratory hazards, like mould and asbestos release, during remediation activities;
- Infections due to exposure of wounds to contaminated water, or if contaminated food crops, food products, or water are consumed. Advice for sorting food can be found in this [food salvaging guide](#).

How can we prepare communities for the winter season?

- Encourage community members to download the [WeatherCAN app](#) or your local emergency management app.
- Establish winter shelters and warming centers in communities, promote the use of the [EmergencyMapBC](#) to find winter shelters and warming centers, and update the map with your own community's information.
- Encourage household preparedness using PreparedBC's collaboratively developed guides on:
 - [Severe Winter Weather and Storm Preparedness](#), [Flood Preparedness](#), and [Landslides](#).
- In regions with recent wildfire activity, advise community members on [Landslides and Flooding Risks due to Wildfire](#).
- Nov. 1st to 7th is **Carbon Monoxide Awareness week in BC**. See [here](#) for the Government of BC's CO awareness campaign resources and FAQs.
- In the event of a flood, the webpage on [Flooding and Your Health](#) (HealthLinkBC) and [What happens during flood](#) (PreparedBC) provide comprehensive information on:
 - Preparing households and making emergency plans
 - Evacuation information
 - Assessing and [disinfecting your drinking water](#) and water supply
 - Assessing [septic systems](#)
 - Assessing food supply and food safety
 - Dealing with stress and trauma
 - What to do [after a flood](#).

For those who live alone or are otherwise socially isolated, encourage people to sign up for the [Red Cross Friendly Calls Program](#), where community members are matched with a trained Red Cross volunteer to provide day-to-day connection, support, and informational resources.



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