Stay Safe in the Cold

By Janet Hackert, Nutrition and Health Education Specialist (1/24/14)

It is cold and has been for a while. If you choose to exercise outside, or just have to be outside for work or daily activities, take precautions to prevent cold-related health problems.

When it is cold out, and I mean really cold out, hypothermia and frostbite can wreck an otherwise beautifully crisp, clear day. Hypothermia happens when the body's internal temperature goes below 95 degrees Fahrenheit. Frostbite happens when ice crystals form in skin, muscle, blood vessels and nerves. Even if the frostbitten area heals, there may continue to be damage causing chronic pain or numbness, joint pain, or abnormal skin color.

If outside activity is necessary during the very cold weather, know what increases risk and avoid these if possible. Exposure to the wind freezes skin faster. Wetness also makes the cold more dangerous, including dampness from perspiration and moisture of breathe caught in a scarf or mask. Not wearing enough clothing — exposing hands, legs, cheeks, nose or ears to freezing cold air — can increase risk of frostbite. Likewise, wearing too much clothing; clothing that does not allow evaporation; and clothing that is tight and cuts off circulation can also cause problems. Being inactive, touching cold objects and being tired, hungry or thirsty also all increase the risk of falling body temperatures.

Take precautions to prevent cold weather injury. Limit the amount of time out in the cold, if possible. For example, if the children are sledding, adults are running, or workers are managing a herd of cattle, pay attention to exposure time and take breaks to warm up. Reduce the effects of wind by covering up, moving along the leeward side of buildings or bushes, or using a closed-cab vehicle or working in a shelter when possible. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “An increase of just one m.p.h. in wind speed can double the chance of cold injury.” Hat, scarf and gloves can make a big difference toward breaking that wind. Wear loose-fitting, layered clothing to best protect skin from being wet or exposed to cold air. When feasible, use mittens instead of gloves to reduce the surface area of skin exposed to the cold air.

For more information on staying safe in the cold, go to the CDC’s web site at http://www.state.nj.us/health/surv/documents/coldfact.pdf. Or you can contact me, Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition Specialist, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local University of Missouri Extension office.