

September 2009 Newsletter

First Responders by Doug Brown

As our summer slowly winds down we should start thinking about our coming cooler weather and be prepared. One of the problems we can run into is **HYPOTHERMIA**. Hypothermia symptoms usually begin slowly. As you develop hypothermia, your ability to think and move often becomes clouded. In fact, you may even be unaware that you need help. As your thought process is impaired, you fail to realize that you are becoming colder. Once you get cold, it can be very difficult to get warm again. Someone with hypothermia is likely to have frostbite as well. Usually, everyone thinks about hypothermia occurring in extremely cold temperatures, but that doesn't have to be the case. It can happen anytime that you are exposed to cool, damp conditions. Older people are more susceptible to hypothermia.

What is hypothermia?

The body maintains a relatively stable temperature whereby heat production is balanced by heat loss. Normally, the core body temperature (when measured rectally) is 98.6 degrees F or 37 degrees C. When the outside environment gets too cold or the body's heat production decreases, hypothermia occurs (hypo=less + thermia=temperature). **Hypothermia is defined as having a core body temperature less than 95 degrees F or 35 degrees C.**

Two things to remember about hypothermia is that...

1. you don't need to be experiencing sub-zero temperatures to encounter hypothermia and ...
 2. your judgment will be impaired making you much more likely to experience an accident.
- If you, or someone in your group, becomes hypothermic, take immediate action before it becomes a severe emergency!

What are the risk factors for hypothermia?

There are numerous factors that increase the risk of hypothermia:

- **Age:** The very young and very old may be less able to generate heat. The elderly with underlying medical conditions such as hypothyroidism or Parkinson's disease that limit the ability of the body to regulate temperature are less able to generate heat. Infants don't generate heat as efficiently, and with their relatively large head size compared to the body, they are at risk for increased heat loss by radiation.
- **Mental status:** Impaired judgment and mental function can lead to cold exposure. Patients with Alzheimer's disease are prone to wander and become exposed to the elements.
- **Substance abuse:** Alcohol and drug abuse increase the risk of hypothermia in two ways. First, impaired judgment can lead to cold exposure. Additionally, alcohol and similar drugs can dilate blood vessels near the skin (vasodilation) and decrease the efficiency of the shivering mechanism, both of which decrease the body's ability to compensate for cold exposure.
- **Medical conditions:** Underlying medical conditions can also lead to accidental hypothermia.
- **Medications:** Some medications can increase the risk of hypothermia by limiting the shivering mechanism.

What causes hypothermia?

Hypothermia most often occurs because of prolonged exposure to cold weather. Inadequate clothing for conditions may not provide enough insulation for the body to prevent heat loss. Immersion in water hastens hypothermia, and just a few minutes in cold water may be fatal. Almost all cases of hypothermia are preventable. Next month I will let you know how to identify the symptoms and what treatment is needed.

We need new first responders. Come out to our practices and see what we do. We meet every second Wednesday at Sorrento Fire Hall #2 across from Shuswap Lake Estates Golf Course. Meetings start at 7PM (rain or shine), September meetings are August 2nd, 16th and 30th. There is no cost except your time. We have a new course for responders starting in October. All training is done in house at no cost to the students. For more information call Sherri at 250.675.2420 or Doug at 250.675.3920