

Winter fitness: Safety tips for exercising outdoors (Mayo Clinic)

Dressing in layers, protecting your hands and feet, and paying attention to the forecast can help you stay safe and warm while exercising outdoors in cold weather.

Frigid temperatures can discourage even the most motivated exercisers. Without motivation, it's easy to pack away your workout gear for the winter. But you don't have to let cold weather spell the end of your fitness routine. Try these tips for exercising during cold weather to stay fit, motivated and warm.

Stay safe during cold-weather exercise

Exercise is safe for almost everyone, even in cold weather. But if you have certain conditions, such as asthma, heart problems or Raynaud's disease, check with your doctor first to review any special precautions you need based on your condition or your medications.

The following tips can help you stay safe — and warm — while exercising in the cold.

Check weather conditions and wind chill

Check the forecast before heading outside. Temperature, wind and moisture, along with the length of time that you'll be outside, are key factors in planning a safe cold-weather workout.

Wind and cold together make up the wind chill, a common element in winter weather forecasts. Wind chill extremes can make exercising outdoors unsafe even with warm clothing.

The wind can penetrate your clothes and remove the insulating layer of warm air that surrounds your body. Any exposed skin is vulnerable to frostbite.

The risk of frostbite is less than 5% when the air temperature is above 5 F (minus 15 C), but the risk rises as the wind chill falls. At wind chill levels below minus 18 F (minus 28 C), frostbite can occur on exposed skin in 30 minutes or less.

If the temperature dips below zero F (minus 18 C) or the wind chill is extreme, consider taking a break or choosing an indoor exercise instead. Consider putting off your workout if it's raining or snowing unless you have waterproof gear.

Getting wet makes you more vulnerable to the cold. And if you get soaked, you may not be able to keep your core body temperature high enough.

Know the signs of frostbite and hypothermia

Frostbite is an injury to the body that is caused by freezing. Frostbite is most common on exposed skin, such as your cheeks, nose and ears. It can also occur on hands and feet. Early warning signs include numbness, loss of feeling or a stinging sensation.

Immediately get out of the cold if you suspect frostbite. Slowly warm the affected area — but don't rub it because that can damage your skin. Seek emergency care if numbness doesn't go away.

Hypothermia is abnormally low body temperature. When exposed to cold temperatures, your body begins to lose heat faster than it can be produced. Exercising in cold, rainy weather increases the risk of hypothermia. Older adults and young children are at greater risk.

Hypothermia signs and symptoms include:

- Intense shivering
- Slurred speech
- Loss of coordination
- Fatigue

Seek emergency help right away for possible hypothermia.

Dress in layers.

Dressing too warmly is a big mistake when exercising in cold weather. Exercise generates a considerable amount of heat — enough to make you feel like it's much warmer than it really is. The evaporation of sweat, however, pulls heat from your body and you feel chilled. The solution?

Dress in layers that you can remove as soon as you start to sweat and then put back on as needed. First, put on a thin layer of synthetic material, such as polypropylene, which draws sweat away from your body. Avoid cotton, which stays wet next to your skin.

Next, add a layer of fleece or wool for insulation. Top this with a waterproof, breathable outer layer.

You may need to experiment to find the right combination of clothing for you based on your exercise intensity. If you're lean, you may need more insulation than someone who is heavier.

Keep in mind that stop-and-go activities, such as mixing walking with running, can make you more vulnerable to the cold if you repeatedly work up a sweat and then get chilly.

Protect your head, hands, feet and ears

When it's cold, blood flow is concentrated in your body's core, leaving your head, hands and feet vulnerable to frostbite.

Wear a thin pair of glove liners made of a wicking material (such as polypropylene) under a pair of heavier gloves or mittens lined with wool or fleece. Put on the mittens or gloves before your hands become cold and then remove the outer pair when your hands get sweaty.

Consider buying exercise shoes a half size or one size larger than usual to allow for thick thermal socks or an extra pair of regular socks. And don't forget a hat to protect your head or headband to protect your ears. If it's very cold, consider wearing a scarf or ski mask to cover your face.

NOTE FROM HCW

Ensure your socks are thermal and your headwear, gloves shoes are waterproof too.

I also have some snow/ice grippers that go over the sole of my running shoes to reduce the risk of slipping.

Don't forget safety gear and sunscreen

If it's dark when you exercise outside, wear reflective clothing. And if you ride a bike, both headlights and taillights are a good idea. To stay steady on your feet, choose footwear with enough traction to prevent falls, especially if it's icy or snowy.

Wear a helmet while skiing, snowboarding and snowmobiling. Consider using chemical heat packs to warm up your hands or feet, especially if you have a tendency to have cold fingers and toes or if you have a condition such as Raynaud's disease.

It's as easy to get sunburned in winter as in summer — even more so if you're exercising in the snow or at high altitudes. Wear a sunscreen that blocks both UVA and UVB rays and a lip balm with sunscreen. Protect your eyes from snow and ice glare with dark glasses or goggles.

Drink plenty of fluids

Don't forget about hydration, as it's just as important during cold weather as it is in the heat. Drink water or sports drinks before, during and after your workout, even if you're not really thirsty.

You can become dehydrated in the cold from sweating, breathing, the drying power of the winter wind and increased urine production, but it may be harder to notice during cold weather.

Putting it all together for cold-weather safety

These tips can help you safely — and enjoyably — exercise when temperatures drop. Closely monitor how your body feels during cold-weather exercise to help prevent injuries such as frostbite.

Consider shortening your outdoor workout or skipping it altogether during weather extremes, and know when to head home and warm up. Also, be sure to let someone know your exercise route and your expected return time, in case something does go wrong.