

Alcohol and Hypothermia

Hypothermia occurs when your body loses heat faster than it is able to produce it, resulting in a potentially dangerous low body temperature. This can lead to organ failure and potentially death. Hypothermia is a medical emergency.

People who drink alcohol can be at greater risk of developing hypothermia. Unfortunately, the symptoms for hypothermia can be similar to being drunk. Young people need to be able to recognise the condition and know what to do if it happens.

While it is important to try to keep your friend safe, the first priority must always be your personal safety. Never be afraid to pass the problem over to someone else, particularly if the person becomes violent. If in doubt, call 000.

ALWAYS REMEMBER, YOU ARE A FRIEND, NOT A DOCTOR

Hypothermia is a medical emergency that occurs when your body loses heat faster than it is able to produce it, resulting in a potentially dangerous low body temperature. Your body temperature should be around 37°C (36.6°–37.2°C), which is best for cells to function. As your body temperature drops, your body functions slow down putting pressure on the heart, nervous system and other organs. The heart is at particular risk as it can go into a slow or irregular rhythm which is potentially life-threatening.

How can drinking alcohol lead to hypothermia?

People who drink alcohol are at greater risk of developing hypothermia. Alcohol potentially causes this condition in three main ways:

- although drinking alcohol can make you feel warm, it actually causes your blood vessels to expand and, as a result, you lose heat from your body surface
- the body's shivering mechanism, which helps keep you warm, is reduced by drinking alcohol
- people who have been drinking alcohol often don't make great choices, so they are less likely to recognise the danger of cold environments

What are the symptoms of hypothermia?

The following signs can indicate someone's body temperature is dropping and they are at risk of hypothermia:

- shivering
- cold to touch
- slurred speech
- stumbling/lack of coordination
- slow, shallow breathing
- weak pulse
- confusion
- loss of consciousness

It is important to remember that these signs of potential hypothermia can be similar to those of being affected by alcohol. It can be difficult to identify hypothermia when a person is drunk, but regardless, all of these signs indicate a person needs medical care, no matter what the cause.

How can you prevent hypothermia when drinking alcohol?

Alcohol can lower your body temperature, especially when you are drinking at risky levels. It is important, therefore, to dress appropriately and try not to be exposed to cold or wet environments if you are planning on drinking. Walking home in the rain or on very cold nights when affected by alcohol increases the risk of becoming unwell and should be avoided whenever possible.

Medical Disclaimer

The information provided on this fact sheet is provided for information purposes only. As such it **cannot substitute for the advice of a medical professional**

First published January 2020

Alcohol and Hypothermia

What should I do if I think a friend has hypothermia?

It can be difficult to tell if someone is drunk or hypothermic or both, but regardless of the cause, it is important to respond quickly and appropriately. If they are cold and shivering, at the very least try to put something over their shoulders or give them something warm to put on. This is particularly important if they are wet as they are likely to be even colder. Do your best to find a sheltered and safe place to look after the patient until help arrives. Sometimes they may not recognise that they are cold, so it's important for you to act and make healthy decisions for them.

If someone has slurred speech, is stumbling, confused or losing conscious, this is likely to be a medical emergency. If you are unsure and you see any of the warning signs, call for help as quickly as possible.

What should I do while I am waiting for the ambulance?

If the patient is unwell but conscious:

- keep them warm and sheltered in a safe place
- encourage them to remove wet clothes and wrap them in dry, warm blankets
- don't let them continue to drink alcohol
- if they become drowsy, lie them down in the recovery position and monitor them carefully

If the patient is unconscious:

- place them on their side in the recovery position. If they are lying on cold ground, try to roll them onto a blanket or coat
- roll them gently and avoid jarring movements which could further affect the heart
- remove any wet clothing and cover with warm, dry blankets to maintain body temperature
- try to protect them from the elements (i.e. rain, wind) as much as you can

Regardless of the cause, being unconscious is a medical emergency that always requires an ambulance. Ensure they are on their side to protect their airway, never leave them alone, keep them warm and don't be afraid to ask for help.