Friends don't let friends get hypothermia! [1]

Hi Alice!

My friends and I are taking a ski trip this weekend, but the weather is forecasted to be in the negatives! A lot of my friends are students and don’t have the necessary warm clothing and gear for skiing and I’m really worried of someone becoming hypothermic... Did I mention that we are staying in a remote cabin in the woods? Anyways, I was hoping you might be able to tell me the best thing to do for someone who might be hypothermic?

Thanks!

Fearful of Freezing

Answer

Dear Fearful of Freezing,

You’re right to be worried about your friends becoming hypothermic (or frostbitten for that matter). Cold temperatures can be dangerous, especially if your friends aren’t sporting the proper clothing or equipment. If someone in your group were to suffer from symptoms of hypothermia [2], you would be far from medical help which is what you must seek immediately for anyone who appears to have hypothermia. If someone in your group shows symptoms, call 911 immediately. Until medical help arrives, follow these hypothermia treatment guidelines:

- **Don’t massage or rub.** Handle the person gently as excessive movements may trigger cardiac arrest.
- **Move out of the cold.** Bring the person to a warm, dry location if possible, or shield her/him from the cold and wind.
- **Get rid of any wet clothes.** Cut away clothing if necessary to avoid jarring movements.
- **Layer.** Cover the person in dry blankets or coats, including their head, leaving just the face exposed.
- **Check breathing.** If the person’s breathing appears too low or shallow, cardiopulmonary resuscitation [3] (CPR) should be undertaken if someone in the group is trained.
- **Cuddle up.** Remove your clothing and lie next to the person, then cover both of your bodies with blankets, to share body heat.
- **Give a warm drink.** If the person can swallow, a non-alcoholic, non-caffeinated, warm beverage could help warm the body.
- **Use or make a warm compress.** A first-aid warm compress or a makeshift compress of warm water in a container covered in a towel should be applied to the neck, chest wall, or groin to get the core body temperature to increase. Do not place on extremities.
- **Avoid direct heat.** Using hot water, a heating pad, or a heating lamp on a hypothermic person can damage the skin or cause irregular heartbeats.

List adapted from _Hypothermia_ from the Mayo Clinic.

But friends don’t let friends get hypothermia, so hopefully you won’t need to use the above guidelines if you try and prevent it in the first place. As you mentioned, warm clothing and gear for cold weather is extremely important and it doesn’t have to break the bank for people on a student budget. A hat, mittens (as opposed to gloves, they allow for fingers to remain in close contact), and many, lightweight and loose-fitting layers can be found at a range of prices. Long underwear is a great base layer, while a turtleneck or sweater makes a good mid-layer. Though they can be expensive, a ski jacket and ski pants are the most important layer for keeping warm and dry. Choose ski gear that is totally weatherproof: insulated, seam-sealed, waterproof, and windproof. Perhaps your friends could visit a second-hand store to find less expensive options or borrow from a friend.

You can also explain to your friends the importance of staying dry. Tell them to avoid activities that cause excessive sweating and to notice when snow enters mittens or boots since the combination of wet clothing and cold weather may speed up a loss of body heat. Also, avoid alcohol and drug use, as this can interfere with judgment (i.e., you don’t feel cold, but you are actually losing a lot of body heat). Though alcohol can make you feel warm inside, it actually causes blood vessels to expand, which results in more rapid heat loss from the skin. Using a buddy system for the ski trip would also ensure that everyone is accounted for and can help each other in the event of an emergency.

Stay warm and dry to have a safe, fun time on your trip!

Alice!

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