

## Surviving the Extreme Cold Weather in Europe

Europe can be incredibly cold. Temperatures can fall as low as minus thirty degrees in some parts of the continent. With the wind this can feel even colder. The weather can change very quickly and without adequate shelter or protective clothing it can be life threatening.

Even in countries like Greece the temperature can fall as low as minus ten degrees and this can cause dangerous health emergencies. This is made worse if you are in cold water for long periods of time, or if your clothes get wet and you cannot get dry fast enough to prevent putting your body temperature falling to dangerous levels.

The risk of getting hypothermia or frostbite for children, the elderly or sick is high and can be life threatening. However, you should not underestimate every ones risks to such cold weather health emergencies, and everyone should take precautions.

Being outside in this kind of extreme cold weather needs some careful thought and preparation. It is useful to know ways in which you can protect yourself and your family.

It is advised that you minimise your travel and your time outside in the cold air. If travel is necessary, here are some tips and advice you may find useful:

1. Keep the foil blanket that you were given on the beach with you. *If you have a blanket that is silver on one side and gold on the other, please ensure the gold side is facing the sky.* This keeps the heat close to your body. These blankets are lightweight and effective to keep you warm and easy to carry with you everywhere.
2. If you are given a woollen blanket ensure you carry it with you. You may not get another one. If the blanket has become wet leave it behind and ask for or purchase a dry one if you can. If you can afford to do so you may want to purchase a sleeping bag, which may be easier to carry.
3. Dress in several layers of lightweight clothing. If you wear many vests, tops and shirts underneath a woollen pullover or jumper the warm air is trapped next to you and you can stay warmer for longer.
4. Cover your head, body and other exposed areas like your nose, ears and cheeks well. Wear gloves, a scarf to protect your neck, and a hat to keep the heat from escaping your body.
5. Wear waterproof, insulated boots to keep your feet warm and dry and to maintain your footing in ice and snow. If your shoes are wet inside try to get them dry quickly. If your shoes are wet try to dry them out. If this is not possible cut a section of the foil blanket and wrap your dry feet in the foil. You can then put on your socks and shoes.



6. If your clothes, socks or feet get wet try to get dry urgently. Being cold and wet and unable to dry yourself increases your risks to serious health emergencies like hypothermia.
7. Drink plenty of warm fluids to help your body stay warm and hydrated.

You should also know how to recognize when someone is suffering from a cold-related emergency like hypothermia. Hypothermia can happen to anyone who is exposed to cold temperatures for too long, and it can be life threatening. There are three kinds of hypothermia:

**Mild hypothermia:** this results in shivering and complaining of cold, numbness in fingers and toes, and the body temperature becomes slightly below normal.

**Moderate hypothermia:** this results in shivering, numbness in fingers and toes, lack of coordination and/or speech, confused or unusual behavior, and impaired judgment (the person is not thinking or making decisions clearly).

**Severe hypothermia:** the person has stopped shivering and complaining of cold; they have a lack of coordination and/or speech; they are confused or show unusual behavior; impaired judgment; they have a glassy stare; have a body temperature below 30°C; their breathing has slowed down or stopped; and they are possibly even unconsciousness.

#### **Frostbite is also a health risk of cold weather**

Frostbite is a serious condition in which body tissues freeze. It happens most often in the fingers, toes, ears, and nose. It often starts as skin that is paler than usual and then progresses to a white waxy appearance.

How to help someone in a cold related emergency:

- If you are in a transit site or registration site alert Red Cross First Aid staff or find a medical clinic urgently. Tell a humanitarian worker that you think someone is in life threatening danger.
- Treat the person gently and monitor their breathing carefully.
- Get the person away from the cold and into shelter.
- Remove any wet clothing and gently dry the person.
- Warm the person by wrapping him or her in blankets or putting on dry clothing. Cover the head and neck. Warm the person slowly.
- If hot water bottles or heating pads are available put them under armpits, around the groin and back of the neck being careful not to burn these areas.
- Do not rub areas that appear to be affected by frostbite.
- If the person is alert, give him or her sips of warm liquids to drink.
- Active re-warming such as hot baths should be used only when the person is far from a medical facility.
- In Europe you can call 112 for severe hypothermia.