

## The Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington's Caregiver Corner

### Avoiding the Hazards of Winter for Older Adults

Winter is a special time for celebration. It should also be a time for added caution if you or someone in your family is an older adult. It is the season for falls, slips on icy streets and other dangers that can be especially harmful for older adults.

"Something as simple as a fall can be devastating for older men and women," says Dr. Evelyn Granieri, Chief of Geriatric Medicine and Aging at NewYork-Presbyterian/The Allen Hospital and Assistant Professor of Medicine at Columbia University Medical Center. "Before the cold weather arrives, it is important to prepare."

Dr. Granieri addresses some of the most pressing concerns mature adults have about their health and safety during the winter:

- **The flu.** Influenza is a serious illness that can be fatal in older adults, who often have chronic medical conditions. The vaccine offers some, if not complete, protection against the flu and its consequences. The vaccine can be administered as early as September. The flu season begins in mid-October and runs through March.
- **Hypothermia.** Keep your thermostat set to at least 65 degrees to prevent hypothermia. Hypothermia kills about 600 Americans every year, half of whom are 65 or older, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Also, keeping the temperature at 65 or higher, even when you are not at home, will help prevent pipes from freezing.
- **Icy streets.** Navigating through icy streets can be intimidating. Wear comfortable shoes with anti-slip soles. If you use a cane, replace the rubber tip before it is worn smooth and becomes slippery on the wet ice. It may be a good idea to have someone walk with you during those days.
- **House fires.** Make sure your smoke alarms are working. You should also have working carbon monoxide alarms.
- **Falling in the home.** Winter means fewer hours of daylight. Older people often need brighter lights in the home. You may also have difficulty adjusting to changes in light, and different levels of lighting may increase the risk of slips and falls. Make sure there are no great lighting contrasts from one room to another. Also, use night lights, especially in the bathroom, and don't have loose extension cords lying around—tape them to the floor. Make sure rugs are not wrinkled or torn in a way that can trip you as you walk.
- **Strenuous activities.** Try to avoid strenuous activities like shoveling snow. You should ask your doctor if this level of activity is advisable. If you must shovel, warm up your body with a few stretching exercises before you begin and be sure to take frequent breaks throughout.
- **Dehydration.** Drink at least four or five glasses of fluid every day. This should not change just because it is winter. You may not feel as thirsty as you do in the summer months, but as you get older, your body can dehydrate more quickly, putting you at greater risk for complications from a number of illnesses and also changing how your body responds to some medications.
- **Winter itch.** This usually occurs because of dry skin. Wear more protective creams and lotions to prevent the dry and itchy skin commonly experienced in the colder months when humidity levels are lower. You should apply them after bathing and then daily.
- **Home emergencies.** For older persons living alone, it is a good idea to have a way to communicate quickly with other persons or medical personnel. If you have a cell phone, keep it handy. Another option is a personal emergency response system—a device worn around the neck or on a bracelet that can summon help if needed.
- **If you are a caregiver,** please remember to check on your loved one frequently. Offer to shop for her or him and check on medications when the weather is very cold and snowy. And remind any person who interacts with her/him to get a flu shot.

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Contact the Area Agency on Aging and Disabilities of Southwest Washington at 360-694-8144 or [ClarkADRC@dshs.wa.gov](mailto:ClarkADRC@dshs.wa.gov) to learn more about supports available to family caregivers. Article content is provided by Active Daily Living.