Frostbite

When exposed to cold for a long period of time your skin and underlying tissues may freeze. This condition is called frostbite. Commonly affected are the feet, hands, nose and ears. People with poor circulation are at greater risk.

DIAGNOSIS (HOW DO YOU TELL WHAT IS WRONG)

Frostbite is diagnosed by seeing areas of skin which appear blanched or pale, and feel hard to touch. There may be a lack of feeling in the area, or there may be rather severe pain. As the frostbitten part warms a red color will return to the area and there is usually increased pain.

TREATMENT

When frostbite is present there may also be *hypothermia*. This is a drop in the temperature of the entire body. It is important to check a temperature and make sure that it is normal (98.6° F (37.0° C) orally). It is important to warm frostbitten parts as soon as possible if permanent damage is to be avoided. The following are some of the steps which can be taken to help.

- Get out of the cold. Warm hands in your armpits. Cover noses and ears with gloved hands.
- Do not rub affected areas or use them. Do not walk on frostbitten feet unless it is necessary to get to a warm place.
- If emergency help is not readily available the frost bitten parts may be submerged in luke-warm water. The water should not be hot. It can be warm like a baby's bottle to the back of the arm.
- Do not smoke. Cigarettes cut down on circulation.
- If pain occurs with warming, it is a good sign. That means circulation is returning. If there is no pain, or lack of feeling remains, it is necessary to seek immediate medical help.

It is always best to PREVENT frostbite.

PREVENTIVE INSTRUCTIONS:

- Wear warm clothing in layers, starting with long underwear and adding additional loose fitting garments.
- Wear mittens; they lock air in and the fingers warm each other.
- Wear two pairs of socks, one cotton, next to the skin, and one wool.
- Wear waterproof boots or shoes that are not tight fitting.
- Wear a pull down cap or hood, covering the head, ears, neck and face if necessary.
- Avoid alcohol. This increases heat loss and increases chances of frost bite.
- Avoid smoking. Nicotine causes blood vessels to constrict in your hands and feet.
- Increasing your caloric intake to a high level increases internal heat.
- Carry extra blankets and clothing in the car during cold weather.
- Avoid high winds when low temperatures are present.

IN CASE OF *RECURRENCE* (IT HAPPENS AGAIN):

- Cover affected part with extra clothing or blankets, or get to a source of heat.
- Come indoors.
- Handle the skin gently.
- Do not rub area.
- Contact your doctor.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- If you were allowed to go home with frostbite and dressings were applied, change them as directed.
- IMPORTANT: follow up with your caregiver or keep or call for any appointments with specialists as directed. The failure to follow up could result in infection, loss of tissue, and chronic pain or disability.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- An unexplained oral temperature above 102° F (38.9° C) develops, or as your caregiver suggests.
- You develop redness, lose tissue, or have a *purulent* (pus like) discharge from area of injury.
- You develop increasing pain in the area.
- The area of frostbite begins to turn a dark color.
- You see a line of redness extending up the extremity from the frostbitten area.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

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