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# Issues

*Information and ideas for those  
 serving seniors.*

# on Aging

## Winter's Blessings and Challenges for Seniors

Winter brings richness to the lives of Minnesotans--family gatherings at Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa and special meals heightened by the scents of cinnamon and spices.

Acquaintances are renewed, gifts are given and received and fond memories and stories are told of those already gone while excited greetings are extended to tender new babies. Seniors who are blessed with happy local families enjoy the holiday season as a time to review their lives, understand their place in their family's unique history and see the next generation prepared to move forward.

But not all seniors are so fortunate. If they have little or no family or if family is separated by geography or estrangement, the holidays can be a time of special pain. All seniors must cope with the physical effects of winter such as early darkness, slippery sidewalks, and wind-driven cold. But

lack of a healthy support system can make these tangible problems worse and can cause significant depression, withdrawal, and even suicide if desperation becomes severe. Families, friends, and professionals working with seniors can do a great deal to ensure that seniors are safe from the challenges of winter and can enjoy the season and its holidays in good emotional and physical health.

### Coping With Winter's Environmental Challenges

All Minnesotans know they need to be prepared for the weather-related changes winter brings. Today's elders have survived many severe winters, often without central heat, running water, or indoor plumbing. They wore wool clothes instead of down and fleece, and, lacking Gore-tex, dried their shoes and socks in front of a fire every night. They were young then, and if they slipped and fell they got up and went on their way.

Even with modern housing and technically advanced clothing, boots, and supplies, severe winter weather can pose hazards to seniors' health more so than to younger people. Winter-related physical concerns for seniors include problems that range from uncomfortable to life threatening.

- Hypothermia can occur if indoor temperature is below 70 with insufficient layers of indoor clothing and/or a broken furnace.
- Hypothermia and frostbite can occur if outdoors in cold temperatures with insufficient layers of outdoor clothing including a hat, scarf, and gloves.
- Inability to procure food can occur during periods of severe weather.
- Dehydration happens due to the very dry air that occurs with central heating.
- Dry, itchy skin frequently occurs due to the very dry

air that occurs with central heating.

- Fractures due to falling are a major risk when there is ice and snow on outdoor steps, walkways, curbs, driveways and shopping areas.
- Heart attacks and back injuries are consequences of shoveling heavy snow.
- Injuries in traffic crashes are more common due to slippery conditions and/or poor visibility.
- Illnesses such as pneumonia and influenza happen more frequently and with greater severity.

Some of these issues can be easily resolved. For example, some elders may resist spending money on sufficient indoor heat and keep their thermostats set too low. Teaching them the importance of maintaining indoor temperature at least 70 degrees and the benefit of wearing two or three layers of clothing can prevent hypothermia. Providing additional information about the need to wear several layers to go outdoors in cold weather can eliminate or reduce the likelihood of hypothermia. If people wear their indoor layers along with an additional sweater under their heavy coat, and wear a warm hat, scarf, gloves, and thick socks with boots, they will

be warm enough for routine trips to the grocery store or physician even in very cold weather.

Using a cool mist humidifier as directed can reduce indoor dryness. (Hot mist humidifiers present a risk of burn injury and quick bacterial growth, and should be avoided). The importance of adequate cleaning of humidifiers cannot be overstated. These devices can grow unpleasant molds and bacteria that can cause human illness. Many seniors need help maintaining adequate cleanliness of humidifiers. Other tactics to decrease dry, itchy skin is to limit bathing to once or twice weekly and applying body lotion all over every day. Dry skin can lead to itching and scratching, resulting in excoriation and infected sores. Since many seniors could benefit by having standby assistance for safety while they bathe or shower, this may be a good time to introduce a caregiver who could ensure safety getting in and out of the tub or shower, and applying lotion after the bath and daily if possible.

Isolation is a real problem for seniors during Minnesota winters, particularly if there are frequent periods of freezing and thawing that create icy conditions. Heavy snowfalls are also challenging because

some seniors insist on shoveling which can induce heart attacks and disabling back pain, as well as falls and fractures. Many seniors are reluctant to drive in snow and ice, and become homebound for weeks and even months at a time. Some seniors are blessed with friends and family who do shopping and errands. However, families often leave on vacations and forget that their elder family member needs to have perishables replaced each week, such as bread, milk, and eggs. Seniors without outside help can run a real risk of malnutrition if they do not obtain assistance procuring necessities while they are homebound. There are many options to get this type of help, but elders often do not know how to get help or do not want or cannot pay for help.

Accidental injuries including falls are the sixth highest cause of death of Minnesota seniors. Many falls and accidental injuries occur during the winter due to icy conditions underfoot and an increased rate of car crashes during inclement weather. Seniors can prevent or reduce the incidence of injuries by wearing appropriate footwear both in and out of their homes, getting help to remove snow and ice from around their dwellings, accepting a helpful hand

when walking outdoors, and wearing seatbelts while in a car. It can also be wise to limit driving in icy or snowy conditions, and increase safety by riding in the back seat rather than the passenger seat of cars.

The rate and severity of illness generally increases in the winter as people spend more time together indoors. An upper respiratory infection that would cause a “head cold” in younger people can develop into a life-threatening pneumonia in frail seniors. Influenza, prevented with an annual flu shot, can also cause serious and life-threatening illness in seniors. It is important to have flu shots each year and the pneumonia shot every five years to reduce the chance of becoming ill. Seniors who do get sick should be monitored closely by their families and be seen by their doctors if they do not quickly improve.

## **Coping With Winter’s Emotional Challenges**

It can be more difficult to understand and cope with the emotional issues that arise during the winter months. While the physical issues have tangible solutions, people often are not aware they have less energy and lack of interest in things as these come on gradually as the days shorten and the

weather keeps people indoors. When people don’t have regular, daily interaction with others they get isolated and depressed. If they have some degree of dementia it will become worse the longer they are alone, and they may become paranoid. People left alone for periods of time often neglect themselves, eat poorly, and don’t bathe or change clothes regularly. It can be difficult for these people to regain their health and well-being without regular, skilled interactions with caregivers who are knowledgeable about the needs of seniors.

Some of the emotional issues that arise especially during the winter months include:

- Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is depression triggered by lack of sunlight and can affect men and women of all ages during the winter months.
- Social isolation often deepens during the winter as people stay inside and interact less with friends and neighbors.
- Isolation and other losses of aging, especially related to the death of a long time partner, can trigger depression during the winter holidays.
- Being alone during the holidays can be very

difficult and can lead to depression.

- Confusion about time of day can occur when days are short and nights are long.
- Depression often leads to poor appetite, and nutrition can suffer when elders are alone or depressed.

Relieving emotional problems caused by long Minnesota winters begins by ensuring every senior has a reliable support system. In some situations, family members take responsibility for checking on their senior daily. Some seniors arrange a check-in system with their neighbors or friends. Seniors without a reliable person to talk with daily are at higher risk of emotional problems, and could benefit from establishment of a support system with a daily contact. Many of the isolation issues can be resolved through one or several people who agree to provide daily contact with an elder who lives alone. In addition, physical concerns such as colds and coughs can be noted even over the phone. A personal visit every few days can ensure that walks are shoveled, plenty of food is available, and that the heat is at least 70 degrees in the senior’s home.

For seniors who develop symptoms of clinical

depression, such as lack of interest in formerly pleasurable activities, changes in appetite and sleep patterns, isolation, weepiness, hopelessness, medical treatment is essential. A caring, concerned friend, family or professional must make an appointment with the senior's physician and take the senior to the appointment. It may be necessary

to sit in during the appointment to make sure the symptoms are described and to assist in obtaining any medication or other treatment recommended by the doctor. Helping the senior purchase the medication and set it up in daily medication reminder boxes will help ensure it is taken correctly. Side effects and positive effects should be reported to

the doctor, if not by the patient, then by the concerned person.

With preparation and a support plan, winter can be a pleasurable time for seniors. Remembering the needs of seniors in our lives and communities will help them avoid physical and emotional problems during the winter.

## How Matrix Can Help

Matrix AdvoCare Network has three ways to help seniors manage winters in Minnesota.

- Registered Nurse Care Consultants help each client identify specific issues of concern and develop a plan to meet each need and resolve each concern. They provide health advocacy for clients and a back up system for families who live at a distance. Matrix's goal is to help each client remain independent and enjoy the best possible quality of life.
- Home care providers that include licensed practical nurses and home health aides who provide hands-on help with

personal needs and homemaking tasks. They are available from 2 hours to 24 hours daily, seven days a week through our Class A licensed agency.

- On call Registered Nurses answer the telephone evenings, weekends, and holidays. They will assist with resolving any concerns that arise and will visit clients after business hours if needed.

For a confidential, complimentary discussion of your senior's situation, call

**952-525-0505 or 800-560-0961**



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