

# MANAGING YOUR FROSTBITE



Frostbite involves freezing and damage to human tissues because of exposure to low temperatures. Wind chill is often a factor, as are drinking alcohol, being dehydrated, having diabetes, and smoking.



Symptoms include a pins-and-needles feeling, numbness, pain, decreasing ability to sense touch, and red skin.

Hands, feet, nose, and ears are usually affected.



Recovery of nearby tissues can take weeks, and loss of skin, fingers, and toes, as well as deformity and discoloration (gangrene), can occur.

Your doctor will diagnose frostbite on the basis of a history of exposure to freezing temperatures and a physical examination.



## What Is Frostbite?

Frostbite is the condition in which living human tissues freeze and are damaged because of exposure to low temperatures. Frostbite will most likely affect the hands, feet, nose, and ears.

Frostbite can be a very serious injury. Recovery of nearby tissues can take weeks. People can lose skin, fingers, and toes as well as have deformities and discoloration. People who have frostbite may also suffer from low body temperature (hypothermia).

Children and the elderly are at greater risk than adults.

## What Causes Frostbite?

Exposure of bare or poorly protected skin, hands, and feet to freezing temperatures will cause frostbite. Increased wind speed, known as wind chill, is often a factor. Drinking alcohol, being dehydrated, taking beta-blockers (medicine for heart disease), smoking, and having diabetes, peripheral vascular disease (of arteries), peripheral neuropathy (nervous system disorder), and Raynaud's syndrome increase the risk of frostbite.

## What Are the Symptoms of Frostbite?

Symptoms include a pins-and-needles feeling, numbness, pain, decreasing ability to sense touch, and red skin. If the problem is recognized and treated at this stage, mild swelling and peeling of the skin may be the only effects. As the process gets worse, the affected area becomes pale and firm. As the area is rewarmed, large blisters, blood blisters, and dead tissue that looks black, blue, or dark gray (from gangrene) can occur.

## How Is Frostbite Diagnosed?

The doctor will diagnose frostbite on the basis of the history of exposure to freezing temperatures and a physical examination.

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The best treatment is prevention! If frostbite occurs, it's best to put the injured area in warm water (104°F). Don't use hot water, which may cause more injury.

If blisters occur, don't break them. Wrap the area in dry, clean bandages and get emergency care.



To prevent frostbite, always dress properly for cold weather.

Drink plenty of nonalcoholic liquids.



### How Is Frostbite Treated?

The best treatment is prevention! Dress properly for the weather and make sure children are protected and watched closely.

Drink plenty of nonalcoholic and noncaffeinated liquids. Plan ahead and limit exposure to cold when possible.

If frostbite is possible, get to shelter and warmth immediately. Immersing the injured area in warm water (104° F) is best. Don't use hot water because it may cause more injury.

If possible, rewarm the entire body, encourage fluid intake, and raise the affected area after rewarming.

If blisters occur, don't burst them. Wrap the area in dry, clean bandages and get emergency care.

### DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Frostbite:

- ✓ **DO** watch weather conditions and dress properly.
- ✓ **DO** drink plenty of nonalcoholic liquids.
- ✓ **DO** get indoors at the first sign of symptoms.
- ✓ **DO** protect and watch small children closely in freezing weather.
- ✓ **DO** raise the injured area after rewarming.
- ✓ **DO** warm the entire body if possible.
- ✓ **DO** remove all wet clothing as soon as possible.
- ✓ **DO** get emergency care immediately if blisters or dead tissue appear.
- ✓ **DO** call your doctor if you think that you have frostbite.
  
- ⊗ **DON'T** rub the injured area with snow! This makes the injury worse.
- ⊗ **DON'T** drink alcohol before going out in freezing cold.
- ⊗ **DON'T** become dehydrated in freezing weather.
- ⊗ **DON'T** ignore frostbite's early symptoms: pain, numbness, and redness.
- ⊗ **DON'T** burst blisters that form.
- ⊗ **DON'T** let frostbitten parts freeze again.

### FROM THE DESK OF

#### NOTES

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

#### Contact the following source:

- American Red Cross
- Tel: (800) REDCROSS (733-2767)
- Website: <http://www.redcross.org>