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Contact: Megan D. Smith
Director of Communications
msmith@ohioafp.org

Frostbite—What to Look For and How to Treat It

(COLUMBUS, Ohio)—Frostbite is an injury to the body that is caused by freezing; it causes a loss of feeling and color in affected areas, usually the feet, hands, nose and ears.

Frostbite can permanently damage the body, and severe cases can lead to amputation. The risk of frostbite is increased in people with reduced blood circulation and among people who are not dressed properly for extremely cold temperatures.

“Take steps to prevent frostbite by wearing a hat, scarf, gloves, boots and wool socks,” advised Suellywn Stewart, M.D., a family physician in Westerville, Ohio. “It is also important to keep hands and feet dry.”

At the first signs of redness or pain in any skin area, or white, waxy skin that feels numb and hard, get out of the cold or protect any exposed skin as frostbite may be beginning.

If you suspect frostbite, seek medical care. If you cannot get medical care quickly or must wait for an ambulance, get into a warm room as soon as possible. Unless absolutely necessary, do not walk on frostbitten feet or toes because it could increase the damage. Immerse the affected area in warm water, or warm the affected area using body heat. Do not rub the frostbitten area with snow or massage it at all. Do not use a heating pad, heat lamp or the heat of a stove, fireplace, or radiator for warming because affected areas are numb and can be easily burned.

“Frostbite may be treated with warm water baths and medications for pain control,” said Stewart.

With prompt medical attention, most people fully recover from frostbite. However, in cases of severe frostbite, permanent damage is possible depending on how long and how deeply the tissue is frozen.

The Ohio Academy of Family Physicians is a statewide professional association with more than 4,400 members, including practicing physicians, family medicine residents and medical students. The scope of family medicine encompasses all ages, both sexes and every disease entity. Family physicians provide comprehensive, continuing care to all members of the family.



FACT SHEET

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Signs of Frostbite:

- A white or grayish-yellow skin area
- Skin that feels unusually firm or waxy
- Numbness

What to Do:

- Seek medical care quickly.
- Get into a warm room or protect any exposed skin.
- Immerse the affected area in warm water, or warm the affected area using body heat.

What Not to Do:

- Do not walk on frostbitten feet or toes.
- Do not rub affected area with snow or massage it at all.
- Do not use a heating pad, heat lamp, or the heat of a stove, fireplace, or radiator for warming.

Sources: *www.familydoctor.org*
www.webmd.com
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention