

Public Health Advisory

Dec. 24, 2021

Appendix D

Cold Weather Advisory for housing service providers supporting people who experience homelessness

Environment Canada has issued winter weather advisories for several parts of British Columbia in the upcoming week. This includes Special Weather Statements, Snowfall Warnings, Freezing Rain Warnings, and Winter Storm Warnings.

These warnings will create difficult outdoor conditions such as freezing temperatures, icy road conditions and limited visibility during daytime. We expect these conditions to last for several days, with extreme cold temperatures beginning Sunday, and will be affecting the weather during the day as well as night times.

Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) Public Health advises that maximize capacity should be permitted in warming centres and Extreme Weather Response shelters. There should not be capacity limits imposed because of concerns about COVID-19; for people who are housing insecure, the risk of severe outcomes from extreme weather is higher than that of COVID-19. Please see information below.

What are the health effects of extreme cold weather?

Exposure to extreme cold weather can be harmful to our health. Some prominent health effects include:

- Wind Burn
 - Excessive dry skin, redness, soreness, itchiness
- Trench foot
 - Pain, numbness, leg cramps, swelling, blisters, ulcers, bleeding under the skin, gangrene
- Frost bite
 - Irritation, tingling and burning, discoloured skin, blistering, ulceration
- Hypothermia
 - Uncontrollable shivering, drowsiness or exhaustion, confusion, tremors, slurred speech, decrease pulse, cardiac arrest or coma (in severe cases)
- Chronic illnesses that can destabilize due to break in continuity of care or access to medicines
 - Asthma, chronic bronchitis, emphysema
 - Diabetes
 - Neurological conditions, such as seizure disorders
 - Opioid use disorder
 - Other chronic diseases
- Injuries
 - Slip and fall in icy conditions
 - Burns and thermal injuries in case people try to burn paper, wood, or coal to keep warm
 - Carbon monoxide poisoning

Who is at higher risk of health effects due to cold weather?

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- People experiencing homelessness or unstably housed
- People living in alone
- People on certain medications
- People who work or do strenuous physical activities outdoors for long periods of time
- Infants and young children
- Older adults (Age 65 and over)
- People who have physical or mental disabilities

What should housing service providers do?

Housing service providers can take several steps:

Aware

- Monitor news alerts for changing weather patterns
- Be aware of health effects of cold weather
- Watch for early warning signs of severe health effects

Alert

- Alert clients and those who support them that winter hazards are expected to occur, or exist
- Call 911 in case of hypothermia or frostbite are suspected

Accept

- Continue to accept clients requiring shelter spaces through the extreme weather events
- Follow public health recommendations for COVID-19 prevention as far as possible while still accepting the clients; risk from exposure to extreme cold temperatures is of primary concern at this time of year and a greater risk to health than COVID-19 for the housing insecure

Assess

- Assess clients' needs for additional warming supports
- Enable clients to take appropriate precautions for winter hazards (e.g. provide additional layers of clothing, socks or shoes)