

Frostbite happens when skin is exposed to extreme cold, reducing blood flow and forming ice crystals in body tissues. Frostbite can cause numbness, pain, tissue damage, and even loss of fingers or toes. **Frostnip** is a milder, temporary condition with numbness and pain that is reversible.

How common is frostbite?

Frostbite is uncommon in Maryland, as most people can avoid extremely cold temperatures. Many frostbite cases in Emergency Departments involve people who:

- are homeless
- are intoxicated
- have a mental illness
- exercise poor judgment
- don't take basic precautions

Who is most at risk?

Most risks for frostbite are preventable with proper preparation. Key risk factors include:

Substance Use:

- Alcohol
- Drugs

Health conditions, including:

- Diabetes
- Atherosclerosis
- Anemia

Medications:

- For heart disease
- For high blood pressure

Age:

- Young children and adolescents
- Older adults



Frostbite Signs & Treatment

Symptoms of Frostbite:

- Numbness
- Pain
- Skin color changes
- Pale, thick, inflexible skin
- Possible blistering

Treatment for Frostbite:

- Seek medical help immediately
- Take shelter
- Remove wet clothing
- Place affected area in warm (not hot) water
- Elevate the frostbitten area
- Do not rub frostbitten tissue

Frostbite Prevention

Clothing and Gear:

- Layer clothing and keep dry
- Wear warm, water-resistant boots
- Wear mittens (better than gloves)
- Use a hat to cover head and ears
- Cover face with a scarf, balaclava, or ski mask

Health and Safety:

- Stay hydrated
- Limit alcohol and drug use
- Avoid tight-fitting clothing

Cold Exposure:

- Minimize time spent in extreme cold

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Are there long-term consequences of frostbite?

Yes. You may develop skin numbness and sensitivity to the cold. Severe frostbite can cause loss of tissue (tip of nose, ears, toes, and/or fingers).

Does frostbite affect more than hands and feet?

Yes. Body parts furthest from your core (the abdomen and chest), including toes, fingers, nose, ears, and chin are most likely to get frostbite.

Should you always seek medical help?

Not always. If your symptoms (pain, numbness, color change) gets better in 15-30 minutes, you should not need to see a doctor. If you truly have frostbite and symptoms do not improve, seek medical attention.

Should you run cold hands under hot water?

No! Hot water burns and can cause more tissue damage. Numb, frostbitten skin may not also be able to tell how hot the water is, causing worse burns.