

# FROSTBITE

Frostbite happens when skin is exposed to severe cold temperatures. Reduced blood flow causes ice crystals inside body tissue, leading to serious or permanent damage. Frostbite can lead to numbness, pain, tissue destruction, and loss of fingers or toes. Frostnip is a milder, reversible, and temporary numbness and pain.

## HOW COMMON IS FROSTBITE?

Frostbite is not very common in Maryland. Most people can avoid extremely frigid temperatures. Many cases of frostbite in Emergency Departments involve people who...

- are homeless
- are intoxicated
- have psychological illness
- exercise poor judgment
- don't take typical precautions

## WHO IS MOST AT RISK?

Most risks for frostbite are reversible if a person is prepared. Risk factors include...

- Lack of warm clothing
- Alcohol use
- Drug use
- Psychiatric illness
- Children and adolescents
- Elderly
- Medication for heart disease or high blood pressure
- Health conditions such as:
  - diabetes
  - atherosclerosis
  - anemia

## SYMPTOMS OF FROSTBITE

- Numbness
- Pain
- Changes in skin color
- Pale, thick, and inflexible skin
- May blister

## TREATMENT OF FROSTBITE

- Seek medical attention if symptoms do not improve in 15-30 minutes
- Take shelter
- Remove warm clothes
- Place frostbite in warm-to-touch (**NOT hot**) water
- Elevate frostbitten area
- DO NOT rub frostbitten tissue
- Avoid refreezing of thawed frostbitten tissue

## PREVENT FROSTBITE

- Avoid exposure to extreme cold
- Layer clothing and stay dry
- Wear mittens rather than gloves
- Cover your head and ears with a hat
- Wear a scarf
- Cover your face with a balaclava or ski mask
- Stay hydrated
- Wear warm, water-resistant boots
- Limit alcohol and drug use
- Avoid tight-fitting clothing



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## FROSTBITE FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **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 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.

### **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.

### **ARE YOU MORE LIKELY TO GET FROSTBITE ONCE YOU'VE HAD IT?**

Yes. The damage to tissue and blood vessels caused by frostbite makes it more likely you could get it again. The same risk factors may also still be present.

### **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).

## MORE INFORMATION

 [preparedness.health.maryland.gov](http://preparedness.health.maryland.gov)

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