

Improving health together



Welcome to this edition of **Improving Health Together**, a public health factsheet to support the PCT's annual programme of local public health campaigns.

This factsheet focuses on 'Winter health' which brings together the latest information and best practice to enable health professionals to take a much more active role. The factsheet also signposts available free resources and websites. Addressing winter health is key to reducing health inequalities within vulnerable households, reducing excess winter deaths and increase energy efficiency.

In the UK, there are an average of 27,000 'excess' winter deaths each year¹, which are related to the colder weather between December and March. Around 40% of these excess deaths are from cardiovascular disease and around a third from respiratory disease. It is possible to predict when excess deaths occur after a cold day: heart attacks after 2 days, strokes after 5 days and respiratory disease after 12 days.

Winter Health

Issue 4 — Updated December 2011



Why is affordable warmth important?

- ◆ Increases life expectancy and reduces inequalities in health.
- ◆ Improves householders mental health and well being.
- ◆ Improves children's educational achievements and school attendance, and reduces the incidence of childhood asthma.
- ◆ Promotes social well-being and independent living, with older people able to use the whole house following central heating
- ◆ Reduces hospital admissions and cost to the NHS – if 5% of cold related illness admissions were averted, this would save £40m.

Reproduced with kind permission: Health and Winter Warmth – Reducing Health Inequalities – a summary produced by the Regional Public Health Group in the South East) January 2007

How the cold affects health

There is a direct link between cold weather and a higher death rate, especially amongst older people and other at risk groups. Excess winter deaths are caused by a complex range of factors, including respiratory or circulatory disease caused or made worse by exposure to the cold and living in cold, damp homes.

Cardiovascular disease

Circulatory diseases are responsible for around 40% of excess winter deaths.

The cold increases blood pressure which increases the risk of heart attacks and strokes².

Respiratory illness

Cause of around one third of excess winter deaths.

The cold lowers resistance to respiratory infections.

Coldness impairs lung function and can trigger broncho-constriction in asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disorder.

Dampness is associated with cold houses; damp increases mould growths which can cause asthma and respiratory infections.

Home energy improvements have decreased school sickness by 80% in children with asthma or recurrent respiratory infections³.

Cold houses can affect mobility and increase falls and non-intentional injuries

Symptoms of arthritis become worse in cold damp houses.

Strength and dexterity decrease as temperatures drop, increasing the risk of non-intentional injuries.

A cold house increases the risk of falls in the elderly.

Mental and social health

Damp, cold housing is associated with an increase in mental health problems.

Some people become socially isolated as they are reluctant to invite friends round to a cold house.

In cold homes where only one room is heated, it is difficult for children to do homework, affecting educational and long-term work and health opportunities.

Fuel poverty

The definition of fuel poverty is a household that needs to spend more than 10% of its income to provide an adequate standard of warmth. This is defined by the World Health Organisation as 21°C in the living room and 18°C in other occupied rooms.

Other causes of fuel poverty

Energy efficiency – loft insulation, cavity wall insulation and central heating all contribute to the reduction of heat loss and enable homes to achieve an adequate standard of warmth.

Fuel costs – high fuel prices reduce the affordability of fuel. After years of relatively low energy prices the cost of fuel is now rising and has the potential to continue to do so.

Under occupation – living in a home, which is too large for the needs of the occupants, may result in them being unable to afford to heat the home adequately.

The role of health professionals

Many health and social care professionals are in a unique position to make a difference for people who experience fuel poverty. There are ways in which you can make a difference and reduce fuel poverty locally, these include:

- ◆ giving advice on keeping warm as an individual – see page three of the factsheet. Give information on Keep Warm Keep Well booklet and Age UK leaflets – see page four
- ◆ tie in advice about fuel poverty when sending out the influenza vaccination mailing to patients
- ◆ reducing fuel bills – information can be found in the Keep Warm Keep Well booklet which provides energy saving tips to reduce fuel bills
- ◆ informing clients about programmes and grants for improving home warmth – there are millions of pounds of grant aid available
- ◆ identify patients who may be experiencing physical and mental symptoms of fuel poverty. The hotspots scheme offers frontline staff an opportunity to refer consenting patients, via a simple referral card, for support and advice to help tackle fuel poverty. To receive a pack of Hotspots referral cards and further information, please contact the Energy Saving Trust advice centre on 0800 512 012.

Prevention and self care—Keep Warm Keep Well

Why keeping warm, staying healthy and living well matters: it is essential to keep warm at home, to eat healthily, to dress correctly and to keep active during cold weather.

Keep Warm

- ◆ Keep your home warm – check your heating systems work.
- ◆ Keep a temperature of 21°C (70°F) in all the rooms you use during the day and set your heating to come on before you get up and switch off when you go to bed.
- ◆ Use a hot water bottle or electric blanket to keep you warm in bed. Never use a hot water bottle and electric blanket at the same time and always remember to switch your electric blanket off before you go to bed.
- ◆ Take steps to improve your insulation and fit draught-proofing.
- ◆ Make sure that gas and fossil fuel appliances are safe and checked by a registered engineer.

Remember – a room thermometer will help you check that you have the right temperature.

Eat Well

- ◆ Eat a balanced diet.
- ◆ Each day, eat at least '5 A DAY' of fruit and vegetables and eat more starch foods such as potatoes, bread, pasta and oats. Wholegrain cereals and wholemeal bread are rich in fibre. Keep foods with fat and sugar in small amounts and reduce salt intake. Eat some protein-rich foods, such as meat, fish, eggs and pulses.
- ◆ Keep a stock of food in case you can't get out to the shops in very cold weather.
- ◆ Take plenty of hot drinks on cold days. Eat at least one hot meal a day and have a hot drink before bed.
- ◆ Keep a thermos flask by your bed in case you wake up cold in the night.

Remember – healthy eating will reduce the risk of developing heart disease, some cancers, constipation, obesity and tooth decay.

www.eatwell.gov.uk

Keep Moving

- ◆ Moving around generates extra body heat, so any kind of exercise or activity will help you keep warm such as walking to the shops or doing household chores. Moderate exercise like walking can be very beneficial.
- ◆ Don't stay sitting still for long periods of time. Spread chores out through the day so you can alternate between rest and activity. If you have difficulty walking, just moving your arms and legs and wiggling your fingers and toes will help.

Remember – the recommendation is to take 30 minutes exercise or activity five times a week.

Keeping Warm

- ◆ Wear several thin layers of clothes rather than one thick layer, so that your body heat will get trapped between the layers keeping you nice and warm.
- ◆ Wear clothes made from wool, cotton or fleecy synthetic fibres.
- ◆ Keep warm in bed by wearing socks, a nightcap or scarf around your head, thermal underwear and a warm nightdress or pyjamas.
- ◆ Outdoors, wear thin layers under your coat, keep your head covered (as up to half of body heat is lost through the head) and wear warm, dry, flat, non-slip shoes or boots.

Remember – exposure to cold and wind produces physiological changes that make the blood more likely to clot, increasing the risk of heart attack or stroke.

Keep Well

- ◆ Book an appointment with your GP to get a flu jab this autumn. The jab is free if you are aged 65 or over, or are younger with certain serious medical conditions. Also ask your GP about having the pneumo jab to protect you against serious forms of pneumococcal infection.
- ◆ Keep a well-stocked medicine chest, this will help you be prepared for treating coughs, colds and flu. NB: pharmacists can advise on how to manage minor ailments and provide advice on promoting a healthy lifestyle.
- ◆ Whatever your age, giving up smoking will improve your health and make you more ready for winter. Contact the NHS Smoking Helpline 0800 022 4332 for confidential advice.

Remember – if you have an older neighbour or relative, keep an eye on them in the winter months and make sure they are safe and well.

References

1. Department of Health. Cold Weather Plan for England.: Protecting health and reducing harm from severe cold. Nov 2011. www.dh.gov.uk/dr_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_130926.pdf
2. Woodhouse PR, Khaw KT, Plummer M. 'Seasonal variation of blood pressure and its relationship to ambient temperature in an elderly population'. J Hypertens. 1993 Nov;11(11):1267-74 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&list_uids=8301109
3. Somerville M et al. 'Housing and health: does installing heating in their homes improve the health of children with asthma?' Public Health; 114, 434-39. (2000) www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&list_uids=11114752

Fuel Poverty—Hotspots

The cold negatively impacts on many health conditions and the risk of falling is increased as a result of a decrease in dexterity. The cold is said to be the underlying cause of 80% of excess winter deaths. Evidence has shown that experiencing cold within the home can be linked to more regular use of health services, and also an increased length of stay in hospital.



The Hotspots scheme enables frontline staff across North Yorkshire and York to refer patients, who may be at risk of poor health (physical and mental) as a result of living in a cold environment, for practical support. It involves completion of a simple referral card that offers clients access to energy efficiency advice and assessment for home improvements such as insulation, benefits checks and a home fire safety check.

For additional details about the Hotspots scheme, please visit www.northyorkshireandyork.nhs.uk/StayingHealthy/FuelPoverty/LocalInitiatives.htm. To obtain the referral cards please contact the Energy Saving Trust advice centre on 0800 512 012.

Resources



Department of Health
Keep Warm Keep Well campaign
 Guides for families, people over 60 and people with disabilities or long term conditions are available to download www.direct.gov.uk/en/HomeAndCommunity/InYourHome/KeepingSafeAtHome/DG_10027755

Age UK

Tel: 0800 169 6565

www.ageuk.org.uk/publications/health-and-wellbeing-publications/

A range of leaflets including Winter Wrapped Up—how to get yourself and your home ready for winter, and where to go for further information and support.

Age UK Advice: 0800 169 6565

Local Contacts:



Harrogate	01423 502253
Knaresborough	01423 864956
Northallerton	01609 771624
Richmond	01748 822307
Scarborough & District	01723 379058
Selby	01757 704115
Settle	01729 823066
York	01904 627995

Websites

Directgov

www.direct.gov.uk/en/HomeAndCommunity/InYourHome/KeepingSafeAtHome/DG_10027755



Keep Warm Keep Well national campaign to reduce cold-related deaths during winter. Information and advice how to stay well and what financial support is available.

DH Regional Public Health Group Factsheet

www.dhcarenetworks.org.uk/library/Resources/Housing/Housing_advice/Health_and_Winter_Warmth_-_Reducing_Health_Inequalities_January_2007.pdf

Factsheet bringing together the latest information and best practice, to enable health professionals to take a much more active role.

Energy Saving Trust

www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/



Non-profit organisation that provides free, impartial and expert advice about making your home more energy efficient, including Warm Front grant, local authority energy efficiency grants and “Able to Pay Schemes”. Also onward referral for available benefits.

Warm Front

www.warmfront.co.uk/



Makes homes warmer, healthier and more energy-efficient. The Warm Front Grant provides a package of insulation and heating improvements up to the value of £2,700 (or £4,000 if oil central heating is recommended). It is a Government-funded initiative. Call freephone 0800 316 2805

NHS Choices



www.nhs.uk/Livewell/winterhealth/Pages/Winterhealthhome.aspx

Find everything you need to know about winter health, keeping warm, keeping well and energy efficiency advice.

NHS North Yorkshire and York

www.northyorkshireandyork.nhs.uk/StayingHealthy/index.htm

For more information visit the ‘Staying Healthy’ section of the website. Factsheet 11 is entitled ‘Health and Affordable Warmth’ and may be useful to refer back to for more information on this issue.

Production Team:

Rachael Kumar, Health Improvement Practitioner Specialist	01904 601595
Teena Smith, Health Improvement Practitioner Specialist	01904 601604
Jacqui Fox, Public Health Information Specialist	01756 701765

NHS North Yorkshire and York
 Skipton Hospital
 Skipton | North Yorkshire | BD23 2RJ
 Tel: 01756 701765 | Fax: 01756 709913
www.northyorkshireandyork.nhs.uk