# Cancer and the Winter Months

*Listen to theCancer.Net Podcast: Cancer and the Winter Months[1], adapted from this content.*

Many people look forward to the winter season. But as the temperature drops, people living with cancer need to take some extra steps to stay as healthy as possible.

**Reduce your risk of infections**

Influenza (the "flu") and the common cold abound during the winter months. Cancer and cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiation therapy, may weaken your immune system, which helps fight off these infections. People with weakened immune systems who get the flu or the common cold also have a higher risk of developing complications that can lead to serious illnesses. Take the following steps to help protect yourself:

**Talk to your doctor about a flu vaccination.** A flu vaccination (also called a vaccine) is a substance introduced into the body that reduces your risk of getting the flu by training the immune system to recognize and destroy the virus before it can cause disease. There are two kinds of flu vaccines: the flu shot and the nasal spray. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that anyone who has a weakened immune system be vaccinated against the flu each year. However, in some cases, people with cancer should not receive the flu vaccine, so talk with your doctor before you get vaccinated. In addition, because the flu is primarily spread from person to person, family, friends, and caregivers should also get vaccinated. Learn more about the flu and flu vaccination [2].

**Wash your hands.** One of the most effective ways to kill cold and flu viruses, as well as other germs, is to wash your hands often?after you use the restroom, before you self-treat any wound or infected area on your body, and after touching another person. Use soap and warm water to scrub the back of your hands, palms, and under your fingernails for 15 to 20 seconds. Then rinse your hands well, and dry them with a clean towel. If you don't have access to soap and water, thoroughly rub an alcohol-based sanitizer over your hands until they are dry.

**Avoid extremely cold temperatures**

People with cancer may be at higher risk for illnesses caused by cold temperatures.

**Hypothermia.** When the body cannot produce enough heat to stay warm, hypothermia occurs. Some medications and medical conditions caused by cancer or cancer treatment can interfere with your body's ability to adjust its temperature. Dehydration, a common side effect of cancer treatment, and having a low amount of body fat may also increase this risk. In addition, people who are less physically active may have reduced blood flow, which can lead to hypothermia.

**Frostbite.** In extremely cold temperatures, skin and underlying tissue freezes and causes frostbite. Skin becomes firm, pale, waxy, and numb. Frostbite most commonly occurs in the fingers, toes, nose, and ears. People being treated for cancer may be at greater risk for frostbite if they have treatment side effects, such as peripheral neuropathy [3] (a nerve disorder), that cause them to be less sensitive to temperature extremes.

To avoid hypothermia and frostbite, take these precautions:

- Limit your time outside in temperatures that are near freezing (32 degrees Fahrenheit) or when cool temperatures are accompanied by high winds or rain.
- When heading outside, dress in layers and wear gloves or mittens; a scarf to cover the head, neck, and face; and a hat. A hat is especially important if chemotherapy or radiation therapy has caused hair loss.
- If side effects of cancer treatment, such as hot flashes or vomiting, have caused you to sweat, change wet clothes and bed sheets often to stay warm and dry.
- Drink plenty of fluids.

**Pay attention to vitamin D**

Cancer and cancer treatments may increase the risk of bone complications. Your body needs vitamin D, which helps your bones absorb and retain calcium. However, because you may spend less time outdoors in the winter and get less sun?the body's main source of vitamin D?consider asking your doctor about how much vitamin D you need each day. Sources of vitamin D include spending at least 10 to 15 minutes outside in the sun at least twice a week; eating fatty fish, such as salmon, tuna, and mackerel, that naturally contain vitamin D; drinking vitamin D-fortified milk or fortified fruit juice; eating fortified cereals; and taking a daily vitamin D supplement (talk with your doctor before taking a supplement).

Learn more about vitamin D and cancer. [4]

**Protect your skin**

Cancer treatments such as radiation therapy may result in dry, itchy, or cracked skin that may worsen in the winter when humidity levels drop. Take the following steps to help keep your skin hydrated and healthy and to avoid skin infections.

- Protect skin from cold temperatures.
- Avoid long baths or showers.
- Use gentle soaps and laundry detergents.
- Apply moisturizer to your body frequently, and use lip balm for sore, cracked lips.
- Use a humidifier in heated homes and in dry climates.
- Drink lots of fluids.
- Avoid excessive sun exposure.

**More Information**

The Importance of Hydration [5]

Healthy Living After Cancer [6]

When to Call the Doctor During Cancer Treatment [7]

**Additional Resources**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): Seasonal Influenza (Flu) [8]

CDC: Hand Washing [9]

National Institute on Aging: Stay Safe in Cold Weather [10]

National Institutes of Health, Office of Dietary Supplements: Vitamin D [11]

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**Links:**
[1] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/Cancer_and_the_Winter_Months.mp3
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/24537
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/24588
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/24397
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24702
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24554
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/26366
[8] http://www.cdc.gov/flu/
[9] http://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/
[10] http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/stay-safe-cold-weather
[11] http://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/vitamind.asp