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Cold Weather Tips to Safeguard Seniors

SPRINGFIELD — When temperatures drop, it's risky for everyone, but for the elderly it can be fatal. Seniors are particularly susceptible to complications from winter weather. Falls, influenza and hypothermia top the list of winter ailments. The Health Care Council of Illinois, the largest nursing home association in Illinois, offers valuable tips to the public on how to keep the elderly safe and comfortable during the winter as temperatures and wind chills dip below zero.

“We want to share some of our tips to ensure the continued welfare and safety of thousands of older Illinoisans throughout the state,” said Pat Comstock, executive director of the Health Care Council of Illinois. “Illinois nursing home staff do an excellent job of protecting residents from extreme cold and related conditions and have much to impart.”

The Health Care Council of Illinois provides the following advice for protecting elderly friends, family and neighbors from cold weather-related illnesses and injuries:

- Ensure loved ones wear hats, mittens, scarves and a warm coat and layers when going outside.
- Provide proper footwear for seniors: outdoors, a rubber sole shoe with treads for ice and snow; indoors, a shoe with a thin rubber sole or rough leather sole.
- Make sure sidewalks and driveways are clear and sanded or salted.
- Keep apartment and room temperatures set at 70 degrees or warmer.
- Inspect the heating unit and make sure it is in good working condition.
- Arrange for plenty of blankets to keep older family members or friends warm while they sleep.
- Talk with elderly persons about the importance of eating nutritious foods and drinking fluids; an improper diet can lead to a lowered immune system.
- Be aware of medications that the senior in your life is taking, as certain medications can cause dizziness or affect the blood vessels' ability to respond to temperature changes.

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- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, to avoid spreading germs; use tissues when blowing your nose and dispose of used tissues immediately, to stop viruses from spreading; and wash your hands thoroughly, to prevent circulating the flu or other illnesses.

Seniors, their families and their caregivers should be aware that winter increases the risk for falls, influenza and hypothermia.

- **Falls**, always a concern for older persons, are more likely when ice and snow make walking outdoors more difficult. Falls and their consequences are one of the leading causes of death in people 65 years and older.
- **Influenza** cases increase in winter. With some seniors having weakened immune systems, it is important that they avoid contact with those who have symptoms of the flu.
- **Hypothermia** is a condition of below-normal body temperature and can occur when the body's temperature is at or below 96 degrees. Persons older than 75 years are five times more likely to die from hypothermia than those younger than 75.

In the case of falls, influenza or hypothermia, HCCI advises families and caregivers to consult a physician.

Media Note: To arrange an interview with a nursing expert to discuss the importance of these tips related to seniors and cold weather, please call Kevin Kavanaugh at 773-391-0272.

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The Health Care Council of Illinois (HCCI) is a professional association of more than 600 nursing facilities committed to quality residential health care in Illinois through a productive and responsible partnership between the private and public sectors. HCCI represents more than 65,000 nursing home professionals serving more than 52,000 residents. HCCI is Illinois' largest nursing home association.