

Backcountry Health

frostbite



Frostnip is the earliest stage of frostbite. The affected skin will be white, cold, numb and stiff, though the underlying tissue will still be warm and soft. Frostnip usually causes only mild discomfort and can be treated at home. As soon as frostnip is suspected, take the person inside and remove any wet clothing. Never rub the area, and never apply a direct heat source. DO place the affected body part in warm water (never hot) until all sensation and normal skin color returns. Be aware that the re-warming process can be painful.

Frostbite is the traumatic effect of extreme cold on the skin and subcutaneous tissues. It is, literally, frozen body tissue. Signs of frostbite include cold, numb areas with blotchy, white, grayish-yellow, blue or waxy patches of skin. Swelling and blisters may appear. Deeper tissues will feel cold and hard to the touch. If frostbite has advanced to this stage, re-warming at home should NOT be attempted, rather medical treatment should be sought rapidly before permanent tissue damage or loss occurs.

The face, nose, fingers, toes and ears are the most commonly affected areas. Wind chill, altitude, alcohol consumption, wet skin, and the length of cold exposure all are factors that

impact how quickly frostbite can happen and how severe it can be.

At higher risk for frostbite are the elderly, children, anyone with circulatory problems or previous cold injuries, and people from tropical climates, but anyone can get frostbite to areas of their skin that are not adequately protected from the cold. 🏔️

—Sharon Lee Maloney, R.N.