

# SCITUATE FIRE DEPARTMENT

## WINTER SAFETY GUIDELINES

With the holiday season coming to an end and winter in full-swing, the Scituate Fire Department would like to share some cold-weather safety tips to help you and your family prepare for the season. Winter in Massachusetts almost always includes periods of extreme cold weather. Exposure to cold can cause frostbite or hypothermia and has the potential to become life-threatening. Although anyone can suffer from cold-related health issues, some people are at greater risk than others, such as:

- Older adults
- Young children
- Those who are sick
- Those without adequate shelter

### **BEFORE COLD WEATHER HITS, PREPARE FOR POSSIBLE EMERGENCIES**

- Know where your electricity, gas, water switches and valves are located and how to shut them off. You may need to turn off water pipes if your pipes freeze or burst.
- Maintain heating equipment and chimneys by having them cleaned and inspected every year.
- Make sure your home is well insulated. Caulk and weather-strip doors and windows to keep cold air out. Install storm windows or cover windows with plastic from the inside to provide insulation.
- Be sure you have enough heating fuel and safe backup heating options or a generator in case you lose electricity.
- If you have pellet, coal, gas or wood stoves installed to prepare for cold weather make sure you have them permitted and inspected through the Scituate Building Department (781) 545-8716.
- Check that your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are working and have fresh batteries.

### **DURING EXTREME COLD WEATHER EVENTS**

- Continue to check the media for emergency information.
- Follow instructions from public safety officials.
- Reduce outdoor activities for the whole family, including pets.
- Dress in several layers of loose-fitting, lightweight clothing instead of a single heavy layer. Outer garments should be tightly woven and water repellent. Wear a hat, mittens (not gloves), and sturdy waterproof boots to protect your arms, legs, hands and feet. Cover your mouth with a scarf to protect your lungs.
- Follow recommended safety precautions when using space heaters, a fireplace, or a woodstove to heat your home. Never leave anything combustible within three feet of a space heater and if an extension cord is necessary make sure it is a heavy gauge cord. Space heaters use a lot of electricity, do not overload electrical outlets and it is recommended you unplug the heaters if you leave the house or go to sleep. Keep a fire extinguisher handy.

- Make sure emergency generators or secondary heating systems are well ventilated. Never run a generator beneath your house or near an open window, make sure the exhaust flows away from your home.
- If you lose heating, move into a single room. At night, cover windows and external doors with extra blankets or sheets.
- Wrap pipes in insulation or layers of newspapers covered in plastic to prevent them from freezing. Let a trickle of water run from a faucet to keep water moving through your pipes, especially if the faucet is on an exterior wall.
- If your pipes freeze, open all faucets all the way, remove any insulation, and heat the frozen pipe with a hair dryer or wrap with towels soaked in hot water. Never use an open flame to thaw pipes.
- Check with your local authorities to find warming centers or shelters near you.
- In the event of a power outage, you may need to take extra precautions or go to an emergency shelter to stay warm.
- Know the symptoms of and watch out for cold-related illnesses. Call 9-1-1 to report emergencies.
- Be a good neighbor. Check on family, friends, and neighbors, especially the elderly, those who live alone, those with medical conditions, and those who may need extra help.

Winter storms in New England can range from freezing rain and ice, to a moderate snowfall over a few hours, to blizzard conditions with blinding wind-driven snow that can last several days. Extreme winter weather can cripple entire regions and lead to roof collapses, power outages, automobile accidents, heart attacks due to overexertion, hypothermia and frostbite, and carbon monoxide incidents. To minimize the dangers associated with winter storms, take the proper safety precautions to protect yourself and your family.

## **BEFORE A WINTER STORM**

- Create and review your family emergency plan.
  - If you receive medical treatments or home health care services, work with your medical provider to determine how to maintain care and service if you are unable to leave your home for a period of time.
- Assemble an emergency kit. Add seasonal supplies to your emergency kit, such as extra winter clothing and blankets.
- Follow instructions from public safety officials.
- Prepare for possible power outages.
  - Fully charge your cellphone, laptop, and other electronic devices before a storm if power outages are expected.
  - Consider purchasing a generator to provide power during an outage. Follow the manufacturer's instructions and learn how to use it safely before an outage.
- Prepare your home for possible emergencies.
  - Remove dead or rotting trees and branches around your home that could fall and cause injury or damage.
  - Clear clogged rain gutters to allow water to flow away from your home. Melting snow and ice can build up if gutters are clogged with debris.
  - Ensure your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are working and have fresh batteries.

- Maintain heating equipment and chimneys by having them cleaned and inspected every year.
- Ensure you have sufficient heating fuel and consider safe backup heating options such as fireplaces or woodstoves.
- If you have pellet, coal, gas or wood stoves installed to prepare for cold weather make sure you have them permitted and inspected through the Scituate Building Department (781) 545-8716.
- Ensure your vehicle is ready for safe winter driving. Keep the gas tank at least half-full and have a winter emergency car kit in the trunk to include:
  - Flashlight
  - Blankets or sleeping bag
  - Non-perishable foods
  - Shovel and sand
  - Tow rope
  - Jumper cables
  - Road flares or reflectors

## DURING A WINTER STORM

- Minimize outdoor activities. Drive only if it is absolutely necessary.
- Keep your pets safe.
- Dress for the season to protect against the elements. Dress in several layers of loose-fitting, lightweight clothing instead of a single heavy layer. Outer garments should be tightly woven and water repellent. Wear a hat, mittens (not gloves) and sturdy waterproof boots to protect your extremities. Cover your mouth with a scarf to protect your lungs.
- Watch for signs of frostbite and hypothermia
  - **Frostbite** is the freezing of the skin and body tissue.
    - **Symptoms** — Loss of feeling and white or pale appearance in extremities, such as fingers, toes, earlobes, face, and the tip of the nose.
    - **Treatment** — Get the victim into a warm location. Cover exposed skin, but do not rub the affected area. Seek medical attention immediately.
  - **Hypothermia** is abnormally low body temperature and is life-threatening.
    - **Symptoms** — shivering, exhaustion, confusion, memory loss, and slurred speech.
    - **Treatments** — if symptoms of hypothermia are detected take the person's temperature. If it is below 95°, seek medical attention immediately. Get the victim to a warm location. Remove wet clothing. Warm the center of the body first by wrapping the person in blankets or putting on dry clothing. Give them warm, non-alcoholic beverages if the person is conscious.

## AFTER A WINTER STORM

- Continue to monitor media for emergency information.
- Follow instructions from public safety officials.
- Call 9-1-1 to report emergencies, including downed power lines and gas leaks.
- In the event of power outages during cold weather, you may need to go to a warming center or emergency shelter to stay warm. Report power outages to your utility company.

- Stay away from downed utility wires. Always assume a downed power line is live.
- Stay off streets and roads until they are clear of snow.
- Use caution and take frequent breaks when shoveling snow to prevent overexertion.
  - Overexertion can initiate a heart attack—a major cause of death in the winter.
- Clear exhaust vents from direct vent gas furnace systems and clothes dryers to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning. Make sure your carbon monoxide detectors are working as it is a silent, odorless, killer.
- Clear snow from around vehicle exhaust pipes before starting the vehicle to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning and do not run vehicles inside garages to warm your vehicle.
- Make sure emergency generators or secondary heating systems are well ventilated because their fumes contain carbon monoxide.
- Dig out fire hydrants and storm drains in your neighborhood.
- Check your roof and clear accumulated snow to avoid roof collapses.
- Don't park too close to corners so public safety vehicles and plows can maneuver safely.
- Be aware of children playing in the streets, particularly climbing on or running out from behind large snowdrifts. Parents should remind their children to be aware of plowing operations and traffic.
- Be a good neighbor. Check on family, friends, and neighbors, especially the elderly, those who live alone, those with medical conditions and those who may need additional assistance.

Each year, New England residents are injured from exposure to cold water. Skaters and ice fishermen fall through the ice and boaters capsize. Hikers sometimes have to camp overnight in harsh weather conditions. Unleashed pets run onto ice and people chase them. Learn how to protect yourself and others.

- Always wear a personal floatation device (PFD) when boating.
- Dress properly for cold weather in wool, which insulates better from the effects of hypothermia when dry or wet than man-made materials. Keep your head covered because 50% of body heat is lost through the head.
- **The only safe ice is at a skating rink.** Ice on moving water in rivers, streams and brooks is never safe. The thickness of ice on ponds and lakes depends upon water currents or springs, depth and natural objects. Changes in temperature cause ice to expand and contract, which affects its strength. Because of these factors, ice cannot be called *safe*. Being a coastal community remember that ice on salt or brackish water is especially hazardous.

Any water that is cooler than normal body temperature (98.6° F) is cold water. Cold water drains away body heat 25 to 30 times faster than air. Cold water does not have to be icy; it just has to be colder than you are to cause hypothermia. The lower the temperature of the water, the faster the onset of hypothermia.

Hypothermia is the extreme lowering of body temperature. Core body temperature below 95°F causes shivering, confusion, and loss of muscle strength. If not treated and reversed, hypothermia leads to unconsciousness and death. Experts estimate that half of all drowning victims die from hypothermia, not from water filled lungs.

## IF SOMEONE FALLS THROUGH THE ICE

- **Call 911 immediately.** Scituate emergency personnel are properly trained and equipped to respond.
- **DO NOT** go out on the ice. Many would-be rescuers become victims themselves.
- **Reach, throw or row.** Extend a branch, pole or ladder to the victim. Throw a buoyant object such as a life ring or float tied to a rope. If a boat is nearby, row out to the victim or push the boat towards them.

## IF YOU FALL IN COLD WATER

- Get into **HELP** position (Heat Escape Lessening Position). Bring your knees to your chest, hold your arms to your sides and clasp your hands. Cover your head if possible to protect your body from heat loss.
- **DO NOT try to swim** unless a boat, floating object, or the shore is close by. Swimming causes warm blood to circulate to your arms and legs, where it cools off quickly and reduces survival time by 35-50%.
- If you are in the water with other people, **huddle** tightly together with your arms around each other to preserve body heat.

**Please follow these recommendations, keep warm and stay safe this winter.**