Hypothermia or hyperthermia? [1]

Alice,

What are the symptoms of hypothermia or is it hyperthermia?

— Temperature change

Answer

Dear Temperature Change,

You’re hot, then you’re cold... sound familiar? Hopefully not. Hypothermia and hyperthermia are two extreme, but equally concerning, states of temperature loss or gain. Hypothermia occurs when you lose more heat than your body can produce and you feel very cold. Hyperthermia occurs when your body produces more heat than it can lose. The elderly are the most vulnerable to experiencing these extremes in temperature, as they have a reduced ability to adjust to colder, or hotter temperatures.

Hypothermia may occur if you are exposed to cold temperatures or a cold, wet, windy environment for a long amount of time. Getting drenched in the rain on a cold, windy day, and not drying off, for example, may lead to hypothermia. However, hypothermia may also occur if you aren’t wearing enough warm clothing on a cold day. The following symptoms of hypothermia include:

- Shivering
- Stumbling, mumbling, grumbling (yes, really)
- Slurred speech
- Extremely slow breathing rate
- Skin that is cold and pale
- Feeling fatigued or lethargic

List adapted from Hypothermia [2] from the Mayo Clinic.

Complications of hypothermia may include getting frostbite (and subsequent loss of limbs) or coma. If you or someone you know may be suffering from hypothermia, immediately contact a
health care provider or call 911. Keep the affected person warm, dry, and indoors while waiting for medical help. To prevent hypothermia, it is helpful to stay warm and dry in cold weather and avoid excessive alcohol consumption. In addition:

- Wear a hat or other protective clothing to prevent body heat from escaping your head, neck, and face.
- Wear mittens, instead of gloves.
- Wear layers (preferably the loose-fitting, lightweight kind).
- Wear outer layers made of tightly-woven, water-repellant material to protect against the wind. Inner layers made of wool, silk, or polypropylene hold more body heat.
- Stay as dry as you possibly can. This means avoiding activities that would cause you to sweat a lot and being aware of snow entering mittens or boots.

List adapted from Hypothermia from the Mayo Clinic.

Now, hyperthermia, on the other hand, typically occurs on humid, hot days (temperature higher than 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit) during periods of physical exertion. This is because during these periods, the body is more likely to lose a large amount of fluids and electrolytes. To prevent hyperthermia, stay hydrated, replenish salts lost through sweating, wear loose fitting clothing to keep dry, and use air-conditioning or fans to keep cool. If you or someone you know appears to be experiencing the following symptoms of hyperthermia, listed from least to most severe, contact a health care provider immediately or call 911:

- Heat cramps — muscles feel tense, pain in muscles of hands, shoulders, or legs.
- Heat exhaustion — feeling lightheaded, sweating.
- Heatstroke — confusion, strange behavior, coma, possible seizures, sweating, urinating very little or not at all.

List adapted from Hyperthermia from the Merck Manual of Health and Aging.

Now that you’re prepared in case of hypo- or hyper- thermia, you’ll know what to do when the intense temperatures tip the scales of your (or a loved one’s) health!

Stay warm (or cool),

Alice!

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