Keep Kids Safe from Old Man Winter

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MAYWOOD, Ill. – Cold winds, icy rain and, in some places, snow—Old Man Winter is here. With the snowball fights, snow forts and snowy hills come some serious dangers. In addition to ducking from flying snowballs and avoiding out-of-control skiers, parents need to be on the lookout for dangerously low body temperatures and frostbite related to cold weather exposure.

“Kids love to be outside, but they also are more vulnerable to cold weather than adults,” said Dr. Tony Pangan, pediatrician at Loyola University Health System and assistant professor of pediatrics at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine. “Most kids won’t notice changes in their bodies related to cold exposure. As a parent your goal should be to be prepared and equipped to help kids have safe winter fun.”

Pangan offers some tips to keep kids safe while playing outside in the cold.
• Dress your child in layers. If one layer gets wet the child can remove it to keep moisture away from the skin.
• Avoid cotton clothes as they will not insulate if wet. Fleece and wool are better options.
• Wear a hat. Children can lose 60 percent of their body heat if their heads are not covered.
• Remember ears, nose, hands and feet. These areas are most vulnerable to frostbite so keep them covered up.
• Make sure kids come inside often to limit exposure to the elements.
• Change children out of wet clothing as soon as possible. And, fire up the hot chocolate for some winter warmth.

Two of the most dangerous winter conditions for children are hypothermia and frostbite.

“These occur more frequently in children because their bodies are different. They have larger heads and large body surface area compared to their body mass, which leads to rapid heat loss,” said Pangan. “Compared to adults they just don’t have as much energy reserves to burn when it comes to being cold. This is particularly true for babies who are unable to shiver to generate heat.”

Pangan shares some tips to help keep kids safe.

Hypothermia:

Hypothermia occurs when the body temperature is lower than 95 degrees Fahrenheit.
Symptoms include:
• Shivering
• Pallor
• Bluish cold extremities
If the body temperature drops further you might see:
• Drowsiness
• Slurred speech
• Confusion

“If a child exhibits these more serious symptoms, get them inside immediately, out of wet clothes and into warm, dry clothes. Wrap the child in a blanket and call 911 immediately,” said Pangan.

Frostbite:
Frostbite can happen quickly as well. The most vulnerable areas are the fingers, toes, ears and nose.

Suspect frostbite if you notice:
• Skin that looks white or gray. Blisters may develop as well
• A burning or numbing sensation of the skin

If you suspect frostbite bring the child inside and call 911 immediately. Then:
• Place the affected area in warm, not hot, water
• Do not rub the skin as it is fragile and this could damage it
• Give your child something warm to drink

“Winter can be a great time to get outside and have fun. Just remember, kids are not small adults. They respond differently to the elements than we do and parents need to take that into consideration before they head out the door,” said Pangan.