What is Hypothermia?
Hypothermia is a dangerous condition in which the body’s temperature falls below 95 degrees Fahrenheit. While this is only a few degrees away from normal body temperature, a three-degree drop can have a devastating effect. Body temperature is a balance between how much heat the body produces and how much it loses. The brain acts as a thermostat, sending and receiving signals to and from parts of the body that affect temperature, such as the spinal cord, muscles, blood vessels, endocrine system and skin.

If a person says he is unusually cold, check his temperature with a thermometer (if possible). First shake the thermometer to below its lowest point. Then, if the temperature reads below 96°F, or it can’t be read on an oral thermometer, call for emergency help. The only way to accurately determine whether a person has hypothermia is to use a special thermometer that can read temperatures below 94°F; most hospitals have these thermometers.

Signs of Hypothermia
The signs of hypothermia are:
• confusion or sleepiness
• slowed, slurred speech
• shallow breathing
• weak pulse
• low blood pressure
• a change in behavior or a change in the way the person looks
• pronounced shivering
• stiffness in the arms or legs
• chilly rooms (indoors) or other signs that the person has been in a cold place
• poor control over body movements or slow reactions.

Responding to Hypothermia
When a person has hypothermia, it is important to make him warm and dry—and to transport him to a hospital for immediate medical treatment. At the hospital, professionals will warm the patient from the inside out with warm fluids administered intravenously.

Handle the victim gently. People with hypothermia are at risk for cardiac arrest. If he is unconscious, check his airway, breathing and circulation. It might be necessary to begin rescue breathing, cardiopulmonary resuscitation or bleeding control. If the person is breathing less than six breaths per minute, start rescue breathing.

If you and the victim cannot get indoors, move him out of the wind, cover his head and insulate him from the cold ground. If you can get indoors, take off any wet or constricting clothes and replace them with dry clothing. Cover the person’s head and neck. If necessary, use your own body heat to aid the warming. Apply warm compresses to the neck, chest wall and groin, but do not use direct heat. If the person is alert and can easily swallow, give warm, sweetened fluids (nonalcoholic) to aid the warming process.

What Increases Hypothermia Risk?
• poorly heated homes or exposure to cold
• brisk winds (wind chill factor)
• hypothyroidism or hormonal disorders
• stroke or other disorders that cause paralysis and reduce awareness
• severe arthritis
• Parkinson’s disease or other illnesses that limit activity
• any condition that curbs normal blood flow
• memory disorders
• medications used to treat anxiety, depression or nausea
• some over-the-counter cold remedies
• alcoholic beverages.