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Weather: Wind chill tonight could be at zero or below

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Break out the parka, hat and gloves; tonight's wind chill likely will dip to zero or below as a strong front crosses the region and is followed by very cold, arctic air.

By the time most folks leave work late this afternoon, temperatures are expected to be in the 40s and sliding, said National Weather Service meteorologist Matt Scalora. The mercury will drop to about 15 degrees overnight with frigid winds gusting up to 30 mph. That will make the air feel like it's as cold as -5 degrees.

The last time Norfolk felt a wind chill that cold was Dec. 20, 2004, Scalora said.

The Virginia Department of Health issued a statement this afternoon about cold weather safety.

"When exposed to cold temperatures, your body begins to lose heat faster than it can be produced, causing cold-weather health problems such as frostbite and hypothermia," said State Health Commissioner Cynthia Romero. "Neither of these conditions should be taken lightly, and all Virginians should take the necessary steps to lower their risk of exposure."

She recommends the usual clothes: gloves, hats, scarves and boots. Dress in loose-fitting layers and cover your face and mouth if possible.

Staying dry is important, but if you get wet, dry off right away and remove wet clothing immediately. If you begin to shiver, get to a warm place. At the first sign of redness or pain to the skin, get out of the cold and protect the skin. If frostbite is suspected, seek medical care immediately.

Hypothermia also can occur if body temperature drops below 95 degrees and medical attention also is needed right away.

SHELTERS

James City County residents in need of a warm shelter can contact the Greater Williamsburg United Way at 757-229-2222, according to a county news release. The United Way is staffed 24 hours and works with the Community of Faith Mission, which operates a winter shelter program at some area churches.

The cities of Virginia Beach and Chesapeake also issued news releases reminding of their winter shelter programs.

In Chesapeake, people in need of shelter should go to 1209 20th Street in South Norfolk at 7 p.m., Robert Hall Boulevard Bus Stop in Indian River at 7:20 p.m. and the Greenbrier Walmart at 4504 Green Circle at 7:25 p.m. to be picked up by a bus

and taken to a church shelter. For more information about the intake locations call 757-382-CITY (2489).

Volunteers of America, under a contract with Virginia Beach, operates the winter shelter program. Participants are provided transportation from the Lighthouse Center, 825 18th St. The organization is also in need of blankets and asks anyone who would like to donate new or gently-used blankets (no comforters) to bring them to the Lighthouse Center Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. or on the weekend from 7 a.m. to noon and 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

ANIMALS AND PLANTS

While it's good to bundle up yourself and your family, it's also good to bring pets indoors, make sure the pipes don't freeze by letting the faucets drip and keeping cabinets open, and to check your vehicle's battery.

Plants also can benefit from being bundled up against the cold, said Eric Stormer, horticultural extension agent with the Virginia Cooperative Extension in Norfolk.

Tender plants and those with foliage that continues through the winter could benefit from being covered with burlap or landscape material, Stormer said. Plants need to breathe, so plastic isn't recommended. Some plants can be sprayed with an anti-desiccant to help them keep the leaves.

Many azaleas and camellias are hardy plants and can survive just fine, depending on the species, Stormer said. Residents who are concerned about any plants also can make sure they are mulched or can build up soil around the plants to help keep them warm. Styrofoam cones also are available to help with insulation.

"Wrapping things would probably not be a bad idea, depending on the plant," Stormer said.

VEHICLES AND ROADS

While you're outside, make sure your vehicle has a 50/50 mix of antifreeze and water and check the charge on the battery, said Georjeane Blumling, vice president of public affairs for AAA Tidewater.

"Cold weather does take a toll on batteries," Blumling said. "Batteries tend to be 30 to 35 percent weaker at 32 degrees."

An older battery can be checked by a technician to see how strong it is. Tires should have good tread in case there is black ice on the road, she added.

All windows should be clear before driving. A squirt of de-icer should be able to help with frozen door locks. Hot water and hair dryers aren't as safe and aren't recommended, Blumling said.

Cars that are in a garage should be started with the garage door open to avoid carbon monoxide in living spaces.

Elizabeth River Crossings also has announced that it mobilized additional staff to be on standby this afternoon and overnight at the the Downtown and Midtown tunnels

HOME SAFETY

If the wind knocks out power, generators should be put outside before use, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's website. Carbon monoxide alarms should be installed in homes with generators in use.

If an alarm goes off, get to an area with fresh air and call for help from emergency personnel.

Pipes can be insulated to keep them from freezing, but letting a faucet drip also can keep water moving, according to FEMA. It's also a good idea to learn where the water valves are and how to shut them off if a pipe does burst.

If pipes freeze, take quick action to thaw them out to avoid a burst altogether, an Allstate news release says. Make sure outdoor garden hoses are disconnected from spigots.

FORECAST

Tuesday's high will be chilly, with temperatures expected to reach just 21 degrees, Scalora said. The record low for a high temperature was 28 set in 1878, according to weather service records. Wind chills again could reach zero degrees or down to - 2 degrees.

Tuesday night, temperatures again will be about 15, but the winds should be calmer, Scalora said. Wednesday's high should be about 36 before warmer air in the 50s returns on Thursday.

News researcher Jakon Hays and Pilot writer Lauren King contributed to this report.