

# GUIDE ON HOW TO KEEP WARM & WELL THIS WINTER





## What this Guide is About

It can be nice to dig out a favourite coat for a winter walk or settle down in front of the TV when it's dark outside. But winter can be a difficult time, too.

Cold weather can lead to worries about our health and energy bills, especially as we get older. Shorter days and longer nights can also leave us feeling out of sorts.

This guide explains what you can do to get you and your home ready for winter and points you in the right direction if there's a problem.

## Before You Get Started

It's worth jotting down a few important numbers that might come in handy over winter. That way, if something goes wrong, you're prepared and you can find the support you need quickly.

**Grove Community HA – Tel: 028 9077 3330**

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**Radius 24 (Emergency out-of-hours repairs) –  
Tel: 0800 731 3081**

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**Marie, Advice Worker in Grove's Office – Tel: 028 9035 1020**

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**NI Electricity Networks – Tel: 0345 643 643**

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**NI Gas Emergency Service – Tel: 0800 002 001**

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**NI Water Waterline – Tel: 0345 7440 008**

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**Flooding Incident Line – Tel: 0300 2000 100**

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**Reporting a Fallen Tree or Block Road – Tel: 0300 200 7891**

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**Reporting Ice or Snow Issues – Tel: 0300 200 7893  
After Hours Service – Tel: 028 9025 3000**

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**Emergency Services – Tel: 999 or 112**

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**Doctors**

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**Local Pharmacy**

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**Other**

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## Preparing For Winter

We all know when winter's on the way but with increasingly unpredictable weather, it's important to think about getting things ready for the colder months in advance.

### Things to Think About Ahead of Time

Here are some things you can do to make sure you're prepared for when it's miserable – and even unsafe – outside.

### Check whether you're entitled to some extra money

As the cold evenings begin to approach, annual Cold weather Weather Payments could soon be rolling out to households across Northern Ireland.

Many households need extra help and support when it comes to keeping their homes warm. Cold Weather Payments are triggered when the average temperature where you live is recorded as or forecast to be 0 C or below for seven or more consecutive days.

Each payment is worth £25, and the scheme runs from November to March.

In order to be eligible for this scheme, you need to be claiming certain benefits or Support for Mortgage Interest. Payments will be received automatically.

## Check that everything's working

GCHA ensures that your gas heating system and appliances are safe and are serviced at least once a year usually in the summer. Please ensure you provide access.

## Prepare for freezing temperatures and bad weather

Winter weather can be unpredictable and can sometimes stop us getting out but there are things you can do to prepare:

- Keep some extra food in the cupboard or freezer in case you can't get out to the shops. You could even do your food shopping online and get it delivered to your door.
- Water pipes can freeze and burst when it's cold, so it's important to know where your main stopcock is – and to check that it's easy to turn in case you need to turn the water off. If it's jammed, you might need it replaced.
- Keep a mixture of salt and sand handy to put on steps or paths when it's icy – this can help you avoid a fall.

## Think about your health

There are often winter bugs going round, so it's sensible to take precautions:

- Make sure you have your yearly flu jab. It's free if you're aged 65 and over, you're a carer or you have certain long-term health conditions – just ask your doctor or your local pharmacy. It's a good idea to ask whether there are other winter vaccines you're eligible for.
- Order repeat prescriptions in plenty of time, particularly if the weather might stop you getting out to pick them up. Ask your local pharmacy if it offers a prescription delivery service.

- Keep simple cold, flu and sore throat remedies at home.
- Follow simple hygiene measures to avoid germs, such as regularly washing your hands and keeping your distance from anyone with any symptoms of a bug or illness.

## Stay safe

The winter months can often feel isolating, but there's lots you can do to stay safe:

- Test your smoke and carbon monoxide alarms are working weekly and report any concerns.
- Keep a torch handy in case there's a power cut. You could also keep things like a radio, mobile phone or laptop charged, just in case.
- Could you ask someone to pop over to check in if there is a long period of particularly cold weather? If you need extra support or would like a regular call please contact our office, we are here to help.
- Write down emergency numbers and keep them saved on your mobile or somewhere handy.

## Commonly asked questions

It can be hard to know how best to prepare for winter. Here are some answers to questions people often ask.

**Do I need to get a flu jab every year?**

The flu virus changes each year – so even if you’ve had a jab in the past, it’s really important to get it every year.

**Is wearing a hat enough to keep me warm on a winter’s day?**

On its own, a hat probably won’t be enough to keep you warm. Pop a scarf on and pull it up over your mouth to help warm up the air you’re breathing in. Breathing in cold air raises your risk of chest infections and can increase blood pressure.

**Is sleeping in a warm bedroom bad for my health?**

Sleeping in a bedroom that’s too warm can disturb your sleep patterns and leave you feeling worn out. Your bedroom should be kept at a temperature you’re comfortable with – usually around 18°C/64°F is ideal.

**Is it bad for my health to sleep with the window open?**

Breathing in cold air overnight lowers your body temperature and raises your risk of chest infections – and even heart attacks and strokes.

**Is it a good idea to only keep my heating on for a couple of hours each day?**

Sudden changes in temperature can cause health problems, so it's best to keep your house at a stable temperature rather than turning the heating up and down.

**Do you only feel the benefits of insulation in winter?**

Insulation is a bit like a Thermos – it keeps warm things warm and cool things cool. So you'll feel the benefits of a warmer home in winter and a cooler home in summer.

**How can I find out if I'm entitled to any help with heating costs?**

It is always worth contacting the North Belfast Advice Partnership on Tel: 029 9035 2010 to check if you're eligible for any financial help. There might be more support available than you think.



# Staying Well Over Winter

As we get older, our bodies respond differently to the cold. This can leave us more vulnerable to falling ill – and falling over. But being prepared for winter and keeping warm, both at home and while you're out and about, can help reduce your risk of serious health problems.

## Thinking about your health

There's plenty you can do to keep yourself as healthy as possible over the winter months.

### Get your seasonal flu jab

When you're thinking about staying well over winter, the first thing to consider is your flu jab. Flu viruses are always changing, so it's important to get your jab every year. It's free of charge if:

- you're aged 65 or over
- you're a carer
- you're a frontline worker in health or social care
- you have certain health conditions
- you live in a residential care home
- you're a close contact of someone whose immune system is compromised.

It's one of those things that's easy to put off – but the vaccine can take up to 10 days to take effect, so try to get it done as soon as possible. Most surgeries start offering it from September or October.

### Check you're up to date on your other jabs

While you're getting your flu jab, ask your doctor about the 'pneumo' (pneumococcal) jab. It's a one-off vaccination offered to people aged 65 or over that helps protect against pneumonia, meningitis and septicemia.

From September 2023, you should be invited for a free shingles free vaccination if you're aged 65-79. If you have a condition that means you have a weakened immune system, you may be invited from the age of 50.

### **Keep moving.**

Staying active isn't just good for your general wellbeing and fitness – it also generates heat and helps to keep you warm. When you're indoors, try to move about every hour or so.

If walking is difficult, you can do chair-based exercises while sitting or holding on to the back of a chair. Even moving your arms and legs and wiggling your toes can help you keep warm and well. You can watch videos online that demonstrate chair-based exercises.

There's no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to keeping moving. It's just important to do what you can as often as you can – and that it's something you enjoy.

### **Keep your hands clean**

Good hand hygiene is a simple and easy way to help you avoid catching and spreading germs that could make you ill. Wash your hands regularly with soap and water and use tissues to cover your mouth and nose if you cough or sneeze. It's also a good idea to keep regularly used surfaces clean, such as the phone, door handles and countertops.

### **Good to know**



This winter, you might want to keep wearing a face covering. If you are aged 65 or over you can get a coronavirus booster jab, but if you're under 65 you may still be eligible. You may be given the option to have your coronavirus booster jab and flu jab at the same time.



## **Eat well**

Hot food and drinks help to keep you warm, so try to have at least one hot meal a day – and use any excuse for a cuppa. Having a hot drink before going to bed can help you keep warm in the night. You might even want to keep one in a flask by your bedside.

Include a range of foods in your diet and aim to eat fruit and vegetables each day – frozen vegetables can be just as good as fresh.

Not eating enough and becoming underweight is bad for your health, especially in winter – it makes it harder for you to keep warm and fight infections. So, while a balanced diet is ideal, eating anything – such as a slice of cake – is better than eating nothing. If you're worried about a lack of appetite or losing weight, speak to your doctor or practice nurse.

## **Consider taking a vitamin D supplement**

We need vitamin D for healthy bones, teeth and muscles. Our bodies create it from sunlight but, during the winter months, the sun isn't strong enough and it's difficult to get the amount we need from our diet. You might want to speak to your doctor about taking a vitamin D supplement for a boost over winter.

## Give up smoking

It can be hard to stop smoking – especially if it's something you've done most of your life – but it's never too late to enjoy the benefits of going smoke-free. After you stop, you'll quickly notice that your breathing feels easier, especially when you're on the move. Your immune system will be stronger, too.

Ask your doctor about services that can help you stop. You can also call the free Stop Smoking Helpline NI or visit their website: [www. www.stopsmokingni.info](http://www.stopsmokingni.info)

## Protect yourself against chilblains

Chilblains are red, itchy swellings you can get when your skin gets cold and you try to warm up too quickly – for instance, by sitting close to an open fire, a radiator or heater. To help prevent chilblains, keep yourself warm at all times. It's important to wrap up well whenever you go out in the cold, too.

If you do get chilblains, dab the swellings with calamine or witch hazel so they're less itchy – but don't scratch them, as that could cause an infection. Speak to your pharmacist for advice on treating chilblains and see your doctor if you get chilblains regularly or have diabetes.

## Get a personal alarm

We can feel less confident over the winter months. You might not feel as steady on your feet, and you might feel a little more isolated than usual. If so, a personal alarm can help reassure you and your loved ones. If you fall or you become unwell, it can connect you to a 24-hour call centre. You simply press a button on a pendant you wear around your neck or wrist and talk to someone who'll contact a chosen person to help you – usually a neighbour, friend, relative or the emergency services or contact Radius Telecare on Tel: **028 9039 7103**.

## Take care when driving

It almost goes without saying, but it's important to take extra care when you're driving during winter. Bad weather and darker mornings and evenings can make accidents more likely.

It's always worth making sure your mobile phone is fully charged before you head out – especially if you're driving at night. You could also let someone know where you're going and when you should be arriving.

Keep a torch, some warm clothes and a hi-vis jacket or similar in the boot of your car, just in case there's a problem when you're out and about. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents produces a factsheet, **Winter Driving Tips**, which gives helpful advice on how to stay safe on the roads in the winter months.

## Keep your spirits up

It's not unusual to feel out of sorts over winter – particularly when the days are shorter and the nights are longer. But there are things you can do to feel better.

- Try to keep to your usual routine as best you can. If you find it more difficult to do things like visit friends or family, why not phone or video call them for a chat?
- Keep moving if you can. This might mean a short walk in the middle of the day to make the most of the daylight hours, or some indoor exercises.
- There might be classes or social groups you can go to in your local area. Check your to find out what's going on by contacting ROC NI on Tel: **02890 351020** or by visiting their website [www.rocnorthernireland.com](http://www.rocnorthernireland.com)

## Keeping yourself warm

Feeling snug and cosy can be one of the best things about winter. And it's not just an excuse to settle in with a good book or your favourite TV programme – being warm helps you combat certain illnesses. These tips can help you keep warm, both indoors and when you're out and about.

### Keeping warm indoors

- If you're sitting down, wrap up with a shawl or blanket. Air is cooler at ground level – so you could even pop your feet up on something.
- If you struggle to stay warm in bed, try wearing some warmer layers. If it's particularly cold, thermal underwear and bed socks are a good idea – even a hat can really help you keep warm.
- Use a hot water bottle, heat bag or an electric blanket to warm the bed – but never use a hot water bottle and an electric blanket together.
- Check if your electric blanket can be kept on all night or whether it's only designed to warm the bed up before you get in. If you have any continence difficulties, talk to your doctor before using one.



## Keeping warm when you're out and about

- Make sure you keep your hands and face warm. If your hands and face get cold, your blood pressure can rise – which can in turn raise your risk of a heart attack.
- As well as wearing gloves and a hat, cover your mouth with your scarf when you go out in cold weather, even for short periods. This helps warm up the air you breathe in.
- Cold feet can also trigger a rise in blood pressure – so choose shoes or boots with a warm lining or wear thermal socks. Non-slip soles can help keep you steady when it's icy too.
- Several thin layers of clothing keep you warmer than one thick layer, as the layers trap warm air between them. Start with thermal underwear, warm tights or woollen socks.
- Check local news and weather reports for advice when bad weather is forecast.



# Heating Your Home

**Most of us spend more time indoors over winter, so it's important you feel comfortable, safe and warm at home without worrying about your heating bills.**

## Keeping your home warm

Low temperatures can increase your risk of flu or other breathing problems and can raise your blood pressure. When you're older, your blood pressure takes longer to return to normal once you get cold too, which can raise your risk of heartattacks and strokes. The colder your home, the higher the risk to your health.

## Keeping your home at a safe temperature

- Keep your home at a steady, comfortable temperature.
- Keep your bedroom window closed at night.
- Close the curtains at dusk to keep the heat in. If you can, you might want to fit thermal linings to them, too.

## Using your heating controls

- Get to know how to use the timer and thermostat on your heating system. If it's very cold, set the timer for the heating to come on a bit earlier than you need it.
- Keep the rooms you spend the most time in warm. It might seem obvious but make the most of individual radiator thermostats and keep the temperature higher in the rooms you're in most. Similarly, make sure you're not heating rooms you don't use – you might prefer to keep the heating low in these rooms and shut the doors, or turn it off all together.



## Heating your home safely

- Test your carbon monoxide alarms. You cannot see, taste or smell carbon monoxide, but low exposure can cause long-term health problems – and high exposure can be fatal.
- If you are a private tenant, your landlord must install carbon monoxide alarms for you.
- Make sure you have an alarm in each room with a gas or solid fuel burning appliance in it, as these can give off carbon monoxide if they are not working properly or if the air vents become blocked.
- Put guards on open fires, and do not hang any washing too close to the fire.
- Keep air vents clear – fires need good ventilation. This also prevents condensation.



## Help with Heating Costs

**It can be tempting to keep your heating off and struggle through the cold to keep your bills down. But there are benefits and discounts available to help you keep your home warm.**

### Winter Fuel Payment

This year, people born on or before 24 September 1957 are entitled to a Winter Fuel Payment to help with heating costs. This is a tax-free payment of between £250 and £600 paid to you between November and December.

If you're eligible and receive the State Pension, you should receive your payment automatically.

However, if you don't receive the necessary benefits or if you live abroad, you might need to make a claim.

### Cold Weather Payment

If you receive Pension Credit or other income-related benefits, you're automatically paid a Cold Weather Payment when the average temperature is (or is forecast to be) 0°C/32°F or below over 7 consecutive days.



## Getting a better energy deal

It can be worth shopping around to see if you can get a better energy deal – you might not even have to change supplier to save money. Speak to your current provider to find out whether they can offer you better rates.

However, switching isn't always the best option. Depending on the energy market, it may not save you any money. It's important to seek impartial advice before switching.

Insulating your home well and checking everything's working efficiently can help you keep costs down.

Contact the Consumer Council for NI on Tel: **028 9025 1600** or visit their website [www.consumercouncil.org.uk](http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk) and check out their interactive tools on how to save money on your energy costs.

## What to do if you can't pay your bill

If you are finding it difficult to keep up with your energy bills, get in touch with your supplier. You might be able to set up a repayment plan. Your energy company can make you have a prepayment meter installed if you have been struggling to pay your bills. However, they have a responsibility to assess each individual household, and they shouldn't install prepayment meters in the most vulnerable households.

Companies should not disconnect all-pensioner households over the winter months – and it should only be a last resort at other times of the year, too.

## Boosting your income

Are you sure you are claiming all the financial support you're entitled to? You could be missing out on more than you think.

Marie, the Benefits adviser based in our offices 3 days per week (Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays) can give you advice on any benefits you are entitled to and assist you in applying for these benefits.

You can either visit Marie in the drop-in centre in our office on Tuesday morning 9.30am to 12.30pm or make a face-to-face or telephone appointment by contacting North Belfast Advice Partnership on Tel: **028 9035 1020**.