BSA SAFETY MOMENT
HYPOTHERMIA

SUMMARY
Hypothermia is an abnormally low body temperature that is dangerous and potentially fatal if not properly cared for. Hypothermia most often occurs when individuals are exposed to extremely cold temperatures for extended periods of time. However, it can also occur in warmer environments in situations such as wearing wet clothing in windy conditions, becoming chilled from being in the rain for an extended period, or being submersed in cold water. Planning is essential before a trek or outing to make sure you are prepared for possible changes in environmental conditions.

GENERAL INFORMATION
Hypothermia occurs when the body loses heat faster than it can be generated. Once the body temperature begins to drop, the heart, brain, and other organs start losing their ability to function properly. Left untreated, these vital organs will begin to fail, eventually leading to death. A person experiencing hypothermia often isn’t aware of their condition because the onset is gradual and, as hypothermia progresses, they become confused and agitated.

To prevent hypothermia, be aware of your environment and dress accordingly. Cover as much exposed skin surface as possible to help prevent heat loss. Avoid activities and clothing that will cause you to sweat a lot. The combination of wet clothing and cold temperatures will cause additional heat loss. Wear multiple layers and stay dry.

Signs/Symptoms of Hypothermia
• Feeling cold, shivering uncontrollably
• Cool or cold skin on the abdomen, chest, or back
• Presence of the “umbles”
  — Stumbles: loss of control over movement
  — Mumbles: slurred or incoherent speech
  — Fumbles: poor coordination or reaction time
  — Grumbles: change in behavior or attitude
• Fatigue

As hypothermia progresses, the person will exhibit:
• Stiff muscles
• No shivering
• Skin that feels ice-cold and may appear bluish
• Confusion, agitation, memory loss
• Slow, weak pulse
• Slow, shallow breathing
• Loss of consciousness

The Risk Factors
• Exhaustion
• Victims who are very young or old; the body’s thermoregulation is not at its peak.
• Alcohol or drug use
• Certain medical conditions and medications can affect one’s ability to regulate body temperature.
• Cold, damp weather conditions

Care of Hypothermia
1. Get the victim out of the cold.
2. Remove wet clothing and wrap them up in warm, dry clothes. Add additional layers such as a sleeping bag, blankets, or some form of plastic to hold in body heat.
3. If the victim is conscious and able to swallow, offer warm liquids to drink. Do not give alcoholic drinks.
4. Handle them gently. Excessive movements or rough handling can lead to cardiac arrest.
5. Apply warm, dry compresses to the neck, chest, and groin areas. Do not apply heat to the arms or legs, because this speeds cold blood back to the heart, lungs, and brain, causing the core temperature to drop even lower; this can be fatal.
6. Do not apply direct heat as with hot water bottles, a heating pad, or a heating lamp. This extreme heat can cause skin damage, an irregular heart rhythm, or even cardiac arrest.
7. If a person with severe hypothermia who is unconscious seems to not have a pulse or not be breathing, perform CPR. CPR should continue during rewarming. Sometimes, people experiencing hypothermia can be successfully resuscitated.

RESOURCES
• Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—Hypothermia: www.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/staysafe/hypothermia.html
• Mayo Clinic—Hypothermia: www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/hypothermia/symptoms-causes/syc-20352682