

Winter wise



advice and support for older age
**Independent
Age**

Ways to look after yourself
during the coldest months



Thank you

Independent Age would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this guide was being developed, and those who reviewed the information for us.

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If you would like to help us to develop our information products, you can join our Readers' Panel. For more information visit independentage.org/readers-panel or call **0800 319 6789**.

Other formats

If you need this information in a different format (such as large print or audio CD), please contact us.

Contact us

Call us on **0800 319 6789** or email advice@independentage.org

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The sources used to create this publication are available on request.

Contents

About this guide	2
1. Looking after yourself	3
2. Staying healthy	6
3. Keeping your home warm	9
4. Making winter more affordable	13
5. Christmas	16

Date of publication:
October 2017
Next review date:
October 2018



About this guide

Winter can bring extra challenges. Dark evenings and icy pavements can make it hard to get out, while cold weather can make us vulnerable to illness. It's not just severe weather that causes problems – even average winter temperatures can affect our health. This guide has tips on staying healthy and safe, as well as information about the help available with higher winter fuel costs.

In this guide you'll find references to our other publications. You can order them by calling **0800 319 6789** or visiting independentage.org/publications.

Looking after yourself

1

Many of these tips will seem like common sense. However, it's a good idea to think about them in advance, to make sure you have everything you need for when the weather turns chilly.

Wrap up warm



Layer your clothes to stay warm – the layers will trap warm air between them and keep you warmer than one thick jumper. Wear a hat and gloves when you go outside and wrap a scarf around your face to warm the air you breathe in. If you have a respiratory or heart problem, stay indoors when the weather is very cold.

Take care when going outside in icy weather

If you have to go out when it's icy, wear shoes with good grip and a warm lining, and put on thick socks. Keep grit and/or salt to put on your path. Some councils provide free bags of this or you can buy it from a DIY store.

Eat well



Have hot drinks and hot meals regularly throughout the day. Food is a vital source of energy that helps keep you warm. Have plenty of fruit and vegetables to boost your immune system and give you more energy.

Drink more milk

The NHS recommends drinking more milk and eating more dairy products in winter to boost your immune system and help prevent colds. They contain protein and vitamins A and B12 as well as calcium to keep your bones strong.

Keep your cupboards and freezer well stocked

Keep basic food items for times when it's too cold to go out. Think about stocking up on tinned soup, baked beans, long-life milk and fruit juice, ready-made sauces, pasta and rice. Keep frozen vegetables, meat, fish and bread in your freezer.

Stay active

Get outside if it isn't icy or too cold – it can boost your mood to get outdoors in the daylight. If you're indoors, don't sit still for more than an hour. Moving around your home can help to keep you warm.

Staying healthy

Get your flu jab

Have a flu jab every year. It's free if you're 65 or over, a carer, or have certain health conditions (such as diabetes). Flu is more than just a bad cold and can increase your risk of more serious illnesses such as pneumonia. Make an appointment with your GP or see if your local pharmacy offers the flu jab.

Check you've had a pneumo jab

The pneumo (or pneumococcal) jab is a one-off jab that helps protect against pneumonia, meningitis and septicaemia. You're eligible for a free jab if you're 65 or over.

Restock your medicine cabinet

Keep a range of everyday medicines at home in case you get ill, such as your usual painkillers, cough medicine, lozenges and sore throat sprays. Ask your pharmacist for advice if you're unwell. Some pharmacies operate a minor ailment scheme, which may enable you to get medicine for some minor illnesses. These are free of charge if you don't normally pay for prescriptions.

Ask your pharmacy if they offer a home delivery service for your repeat prescriptions too. This can be especially helpful in cold weather.



Get enough vitamin D

Lack of sunshine in winter can mean you don't get enough vitamin D, which can make you feel tired. The main source of vitamin D is sunlight but you can also get it from oily fish (such as salmon, tuna, mackerel and sardines), eggs, red meat, liver, margarine, and some cereals. However, it's difficult to get enough vitamin D from food alone.

The Department of Health recommends that all adults take a daily vitamin D supplement from October to March. People at higher risk of vitamin D deficiency may be advised to take a supplement all year round. Speak to your GP or pharmacist for advice.



Keeping your home warm

Check the thermostat

Being cold isn't just uncomfortable – it can also be very bad for your health. Low temperatures increase the risk of flu as well as a heart attack, stroke or hypothermia. Your living room should be around 21°C (70°F) and other rooms should be at least 18°C (64°F).



Check your boiler

Get your boiler serviced annually to make sure it doesn't break down when you need it most. To find a gas engineer, contact the Gas Safe Register ([0800 408 5500, gassaferegister.co.uk](https://www.gassaferegister.co.uk)). If you rent, check if your landlord has arranged this.

Keep warm at night

A hot water bottle or electric blanket can warm up your bed. Never use both together, as this can be dangerous. Check whether you can keep your blanket on all night or should switch it off before you get into bed. Get your blanket checked every three years by an expert. Ask about this at the shop where you bought it or contact your local council's trading standards department – they may even run free testing days.

Keep your bedroom window closed at night when it's cold – low temperatures can raise your blood pressure and put you at risk of a stroke or heart attack.

Simple tips to keep your home warm

Draw your curtains before it gets dark to keep the heat in, and consider getting thermal or heavy ones to keep your room warmer. Don't block your radiators with furniture – keep them clear so heat can circulate. Put draught excluders round doors and windows. Contact the Energy Saving Advice Service for more tips ([0300 123 1234](tel:03001231234), energysavingtrust.org.uk).

Get your home insulated

Insulating your loft and cavity walls and fitting a jacket to your hot water cylinder can make your home much warmer and reduce your bills. Read our factsheet **Paying for maintenance and repairs in your home** to find out more about home insulation and whether you can get help to pay for it.

Apply for a grant to make your home warmer

There is support available to make your home more energy efficient, which will make it feel warmer and reduce your fuel bills too. You could be eligible for help with insulating your home through the Energy Company Obligation (ECO) scheme. You may also get help with repairing or replacing your boiler or heating system if you own or privately rent your home, receive certain benefits, are in fuel poverty or live on a low income, and are vulnerable to the effects of a cold home. Contact the Energy Saving Advice Service to find out if you're eligible ([0300 123 1234](tel:03001231234), energysavingtrust.org.uk).



Join the Priority Services Register

If you're of pensionable age, disabled, or have a chronic illness or sight or hearing impairment, make sure you've signed up to your energy supplier's and network operator's Priority Services Register. This gives you free support and services, so for example, you might be given advance notice of power cuts or offered alternative heating facilities if your supply is disrupted. Suppliers and network operators offer different help, so contact both to find out what they provide.

Making winter more affordable

Claim the money you're entitled to

Most people born before 6 August 1953 will get a Winter Fuel Payment of between £100 and £300 in November or December 2017. Call the Winter Fuel Payment Centre on **0345 915 1515** or visit gov.uk/winter-fuel-payment for more information.

If you get Pension Credit, you should automatically get a Cold Weather Payment of £25 when the temperature in your area is at 0°C (32°F) or below for seven days in a row between 1 November and 31 March.

You may qualify for a £140 discount on your electricity bill if you receive Guarantee Pension Credit or you're on a low income, even if you use a pre-pay meter. Contact your energy supplier to check if they are part of the scheme, or the Warm Home Discount Scheme to find out more (**0345 603 9439**, gov.uk/the-warm-home-discount-scheme/what-youll-get).

Pension Credit can top up your weekly income if it's below £159.35 for a single person, or £243.25 for a couple (rates apply until April 2018). These figures may be higher if you're a carer or receive certain disability benefits. For more information, see our factsheet **Pension Credit**.

Call us on **0800 319 6789** for a full benefits check, or try our online calculator (independentage.org/benefit-calculator).

Check you're on the best fuel tariff

Switching supplier can be the best way to save money and may be easier than you think. Ofgem, the energy regulator, has created a website (goenergysshopping.co.uk) that can help you find out if you could save money by switching. If you're not online, call one of the Ofgem-accredited energy switching companies for advice – for example, uSwitch (**0800 051 5493**, uswitch.com).

Get help if you're in debt

If you're struggling to pay your energy bills, contact your supplier to set up a repayment plan. Charis Grants can direct you to sources of financial help with fuel bills (**01733 421 021**, charisgrants.com).

For free, independent advice about debt, contact the debt charities National Debtline (**0808 808 4000**, nationaldebtline.org) or Stepchange (**0800 138 1111**, stepchange.org).



Christmas

Whether or not you celebrate it, Christmas is a time of year that can bring extra challenges, both financial and emotional.

Budgeting for Christmas

Costs can add up, with an average Christmas spend per household of £500. It's worth setting a budget and saving towards it from several months in advance. Start shopping early – you can pick up bargains in sales throughout the year – but if you're buying gift vouchers make sure you check expiry dates. Try our online budget planner to work out how much you should be saving ([independentage.org/christmas-calculator](https://www.independentage.org/christmas-calculator)).

Remember, you don't have to spend more than you want to. If you're worried about other people's expectations, you could talk to friends and family about setting a budget for how much you will spend on each other's presents.

For general tips on saving money, see our free guide **Moneywise**.

Loneliness at Christmas

You may enjoy spending some time on your own, but if you're worried about spending Christmas alone or feeling lonely over the Christmas period, start thinking about simple ways to alleviate this:

- Consider planning your time alone to make it a positive experience. Could you indulge a hobby like going to the theatre or watching your favourite film, and make sure you have all the foods you like in the house?
- Think of ways to contact people you can't see in person. Perhaps you could ring them, email them or use Skype to call free between two computers – useful if people are living abroad and phone rates are high.
- Talk to someone. The Silver Line (0800 4 70 80 90, thesilverline.org.uk) is a helpline specifically for older people, providing emotional support and advice. It's open 24 hours a day, every day, including at Christmas.
- Explore new ways to meet people. You could see if there are any events happening in your area, like carol services or community lunches

on Christmas Day. Community Christmas lists events ([0800 063 9285](tel:08000639285), communitychristmas.org.uk). Online forums can also be a good way to meet people with similar interests. For example, Gransnet (not just for grans!) is a social networking site for over-50s. Our website has some tips on staying safe online (independentage.org/information/personal-life/staying-safe-online).

- Consider volunteering. This helps others and can be a very rewarding experience for you. Investigate opportunities in your area.



Independent Age volunteers make regular calls or visits to older people. You could apply to be a volunteer or request calls or visits for yourself ([020 7605 4255](tel:02076054255), independentage.org/volunteer). The Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme also helps over-50s find opportunities to use their skills and experience in the community ([020 3780 5870](tel:02037805870), volunteeringmatters.org.uk/pillars/older-people).

Most people will feel lonely at some point, but if you're struggling with feelings of loneliness, help is available. Read our guide **If you're feeling lonely** for more ideas.

Our free advice guides

Our practical, jargon-free advice guides give you the information you need to get the most out of older age.



Advice for later life

Behind the wheel

Being winter wise

Choosing where to live

Coping with bereavement

Dealing with depression

Getting help at home

How to find the right care home

If you're feeling lonely

Moneywise

Scamwise

Staying in control when you're older

To order your free advice guides, call
0800 319 6789 or visit independentage.org

The information in this guide applies to England only.

If you're in Wales, contact Age Cymru ([0800 022 3444](tel:08000223444), agecymru.org.uk) for information and advice.

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland ([0800 12 44 222](tel:08001244222), agescotland.org.uk).

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI ([0808 808 7575](tel:08088087575), ageni.org).

We want the UK to be the best place to grow older and we have ambitious targets to increase the number of older people we help and the difference we make. We receive no state funding and rely on income from individuals, trusts and other sources to continue providing our services to hundreds of thousands of older people in need.

Visit independentage.org to make a secure online donation and find out about other ways to support us. Alternatively, you can call us on [020 7605 4223](tel:02076054223) or email supporters@independentage.org.



About Independent Age

Whatever happens as we get older, we all want to remain independent and live life on our own terms. That's why, as well as offering regular friendly contact and a strong campaigning voice, Independent Age can provide you and your family with clear, free and impartial advice on the issues that matter: care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility.

A charity founded over 150 years ago, we're independent so you can be.

For more information, visit our website **independentage.org**

Call us for information or to arrange free, impartial advice from an expert adviser. Lines are open 8am–8pm Monday to Friday and 9am–1pm Saturday. Freephone **0800 319 6789** or email **advice@independentage.org**



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Independent Age is the operating name of the Royal United Kingdom Beneficent Association
Registered charity number 210729 (England and Wales) SC047184 (Scotland)



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