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HEALTH

# How cold is too cold to exercise outside? Here's what experts say

While frozen airways and hypothermia are unlikely even in frigid Toronto temperatures, exercising outside — especially in sub-zero temperatures — can carry risks.

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Exercising outdoors in winter also presents the risk of slips, trips and falls, which only become more prevalent with snow, sleet and ice lining roads and sidewalks.

Andrew Francis Wallace / Toronto Star

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By Hayden Godfrey Staff Reporter

As Canadians trudge their way through yet another dreary, frigid and slush-and-snow-filled winter, it's only natural to want to [keep warm in the cosy confines of the great indoors](#).

Going to the gym or doing in-home workouts to keep active can be great, but little can [replicate fresh air and a change of scenery](#) during long, drawn out winter days.

But exercising outside — especially [in sub-zero temperatures](#) — can carry risks of its own.

So, how cold is too cold to exercise?

## Be practical when exercising outside

Before even getting to temperature-specific considerations, it's important to pay attention to the conditions.

From a practical perspective, it's smart to let someone know you're going out and be careful to stay within a reasonable distance of a dry and warm place, said Robert Bentley, an assistant professor of cardiovascular physiology at the University of Toronto.

“Practically, when exercising in the cold, it may be important to make sure others are aware of your plans and not to stray too far from a potential dry, warm shelter like a building or your vehicle,” Bentley wrote in an email to the Star. “Just like exercising in any condition, hydration, proper attire and some planning are needed.”



### HEALTH

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## Hypothermia and freezing not a risk for joggers

In short, there's no specific, objective temperature that experts deem “too cold” to exercise.

Though it's important to bundle up to prevent discomfort and skin irritation from the cold, [hypothermia](#) shouldn't be a concern for everyday city joggers or runners even in the winter, says Olivier Birot, an associate professor of physiology at York University, nor should frozen airways.

Once air gets two inches into the nasal cavity, it has already warmed to nearly 15 C, so there's no real risk of any airway mechanism freezing, Birot says, so while it may be cold or unpleasant, it isn't dangerous.

Plus, the body's internal temperature is extremely well-regulated, so it's tough to dislodge its equilibrium and unlikely to occur while spending an hour outside, [even in the frigid Toronto air](#).



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“So what you experience may be unpleasant throat irritation or inflammation,” he told the Star, “but there’s no risk of freezing your airways or your lungs.”

Instead, the greater risks are muscle incapacitation, but even that isn’t likely when going on runs in areas like Toronto, since you’re largely utilizing larger muscles in your legs that have greater insulation.

A good barometer is whether you’re still producing heat; Birot likens the body to a car, where you can keep the heating system on as long as you have enough gas in the tank.

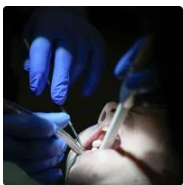
“If you’re exercising, you’re producing heat. You’re like a furnace,” Birot said. “As long as you are producing heat during exercise, you’re fine.”

### **Keep an eye on the environment**

The type of exercise and the health of the person doing the exercise should also be taken into consideration, Birot said, so too should wind chill, the presence of any air pollution alerts and whether you have any underlying respiratory or cardiovascular conditions.

There’s also the ever-present risk of slips, trips and falls, which only become more prevalent with snow, sleet and ice lining roads and sidewalks.

In recent weeks, Toronto has seen [snowy and icy conditions](#) persist even [days after the massive dumps of snow](#) blanketed the city ceased.



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## Common sense should rule

While there's no specific low temperature that is considered broadly unsafe to exercise outdoors, it may be prudent to take things slower if you're heading out for an evening run on [slick streets or down a snowy path in the park](#).

“A typical rule of thumb that I tend to use is as the temperatures drop, so should the intensity of your physical activity,” adds Leigh Vanderloo, the scientific director at ParticipACTION, a Canadian non-profit organization dedicated to promoting fitness and exercise. “But it's also really important to note that, despite the weather, physical activity really should remain a top priority year round.”

“What cold is too cold? I would say it's based on a lot of common sense,” Birot concluded.



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