

The impact of cold homes on health



Dr Sara Humphrey

Clinical Network for Older People's Mental Health and Dementia,
Yorkshire and the Humber

NHS England and NHS Improvement



Cold homes and health

- Older adults are vulnerable to cold-related ill-health due to a number of intersecting risk factors
- Most cold-related ill-health occurs at moderate outdoor winter temperatures (4-8C)
- 30% increase in mortality in winter among those aged 75+ - cold homes likely to contribute to this figure
- Excess winter deaths in the coldest 25% of homes are almost three times as high as in the warmest 25%
- Cold homes have both a direct and indirect impact on health

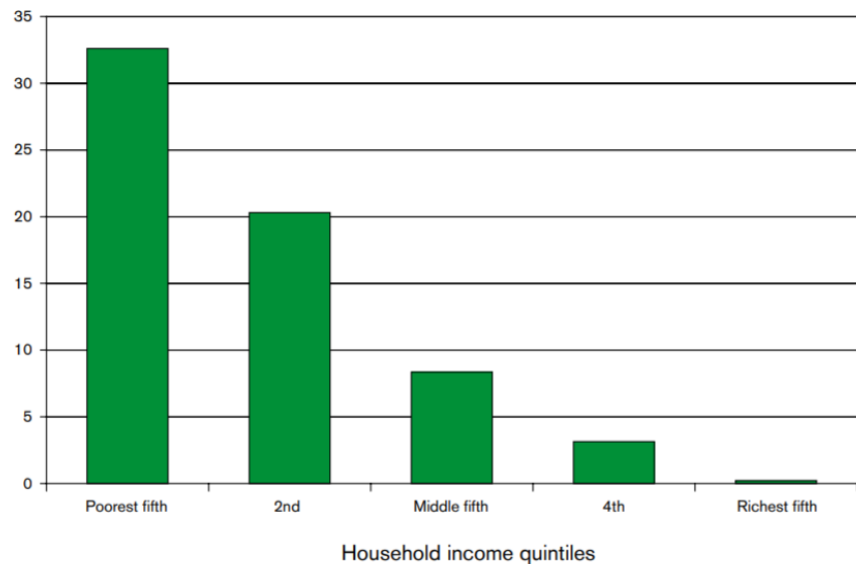
Source:
https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/documents/Fuel_poverty_health_inequalities.pdf



Inequalities and cold homes

- Risk of fuel poverty rises sharply as household income falls
- 19% of those in private rented accommodation were in fuel poverty compared with 11% in other tenures
- Older properties are less energy efficient than new-build housing stock.
- Rural properties may not have access to mains gas
- Fluctuations in fuel prices

Percent of households in fuel poverty



Note: Percent in fuel poverty relates to households in fuel poverty after deducting housing costs
Source: ONS (18)

Although exposure to extreme cold can kill directly through hypothermia, this is not the main cause of cold related illness and death.

The health impacts of cold weather can have direct and indirect effects.



Direct Health Effects
Heart attack
Stroke
Respiratory disease
Influenza
Falls and injuries
Hypothermia
COVID-19

Indirect Health Effects
Mental health effects from depression
Reduced educational and employment attainment
Risk of carbon monoxide poisoning
COVID-19



Direct health impacts of cold housing

- Circulatory diseases
- Respiratory diseases
- Suppression of the immune system – increased risk of minor illnesses
- Exacerbation of long term conditions including diabetes and pain associated with osteoarthritis
- Delayed recovery on discharge from hospital

Source: <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/the-health-impacts-of-cold-homes-and-fuel-poverty/the-health-impacts-of-cold-homes-and-fuel-poverty.pdf>



Indirect health impacts of cold housing

- Social isolation and mental wellbeing
- Nutritional intake can worsen : 'heat or eat'
- Increased arthritic symptoms impact on strength and dexterity leading to unintentional injuries
- Increase in falls and domestic accidents



Source: <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/the-health-impacts-of-cold-homes-and-fuel-poverty/the-health-impacts-of-cold-homes-and-fuel-poverty.pdf>

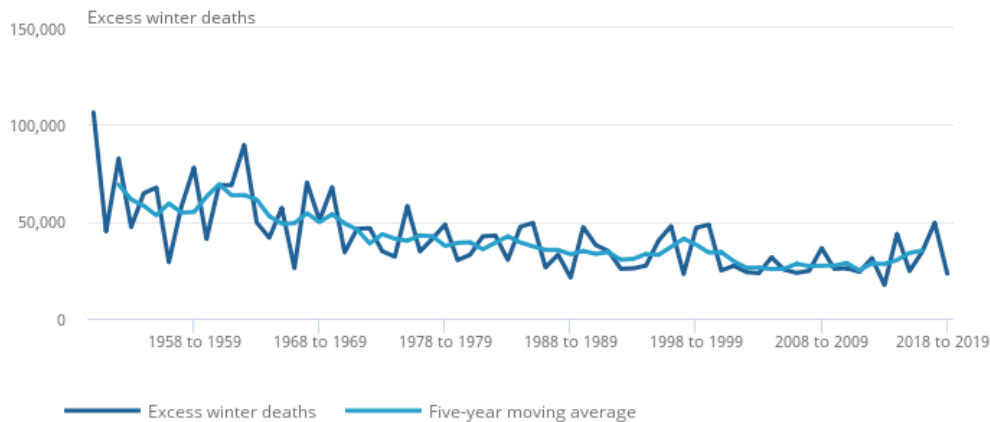
How cold is too cold?

Temperature	Health Impacts
18°C	minimal risks to health for a sedentary person wearing suitable clothing
Under 18°C	may increase blood pressure and risk of cardiovascular disease
Under 16°C	may diminish resistance to respiratory diseases
4 to 8°C	increased risk of death observed at population level
At or below 5°C	high risk of hypothermia

Excess winter deaths

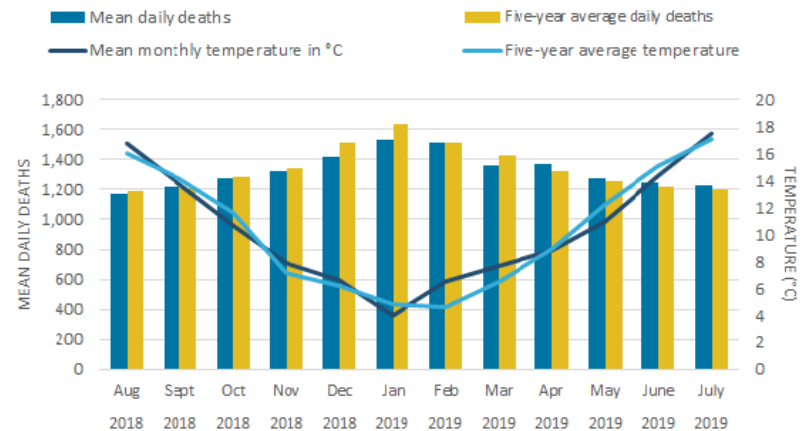
Figure 1: The five-year moving average increased for the third consecutive year

Excess winter deaths and five-year central moving average (based on death occurrences), England and Wales, between 1950 to 1951 and 2018 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics

Mean daily deaths each month and mean monthly temperatures, 2018-2019



Impact on health and care services

- GP consultations for respiratory tract infections can increase by up to 19% for every one degree drop in mean temperature below 5C
- Hospital admissions for respiratory conditions and ischaemic heart disease increase substantially during the winter months.
- Cost to the NHS of cold homes estimated at £1.36 billion in 2012
- Increased falls can lead to increased reliance on social care support



Cold homes and Covid-19

- Covid-19 likely to amplify the risks of cold
- Shared risk factors for the groups most at risk of Covid and cold homes
- Physical impact of cold homes increases susceptibility to Covid
- Complications or long-term impacts of Covid may increase vulnerability to temperature-related ill-health
- Anxiety leading to reluctance of many older adults to return to social activities
- More time spent indoors – less likely to ventilate rooms – increased transmission risk



What can you do?

- MECCLink website's Affordable Warmth module guides you through questions to ask, how to assist and where to access local support
- Raise the issue at routine appointments – flu/booster clinics, long term condition annual reviews, social prescribing assessments
- Provide advice and information on keeping warm:
 - wrap in thin layers, keep moving, use a hot water bottle or wheat bag, wear gloves and socks and keep feet off the floor, keep windows closed and draft-free*
- Signpost to support from Age UK and other third sector organisations that can help:
 - Benefit entitlement checks (winter fuel payments, cold weather payments, warm home discount)
 - Home energy checks



"The Home Energy Check made a significant difference to me, it's such a brilliant idea. None of the doors fitted properly but now that the draft excluders are on, they all shut properly so it's so much warmer...I don't remember things too well but I know I'm definitely much warmer in here now, nice and cosy."

Eira, 62

Age UK service user

Resources

- MECCLink <https://www.mecclink.co.uk/yorkshire-humber/affordable-warmth/>
- Keep Warm Keep Well leaflets <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keep-warm-keep-well-leaflet-gives-advice-on-staying-healthy-in-cold-weather>
- Cold Weather Plan for England <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cold-weather-plan-cwp-for-england>
- Support from AgeUK <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/programmes/safe-and-warm/>
- Advice on keeping warm and reducing fuel costs: <https://fuelpovertyresource.org.uk/focus-on/keeping-warm-at-christmas/>
- Citizen's Advice Cold Homes toolkit <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/our-work/advice-partnerships/cold-homes-toolkit/>

Any questions?



Images used in this presentation are taken from the Centre for Ageing Better's free age-positive image library: <https://ageingbetter.resourcespace.com/pages/home.php>