

Why Older People Feel Cold More

The most common health complaint of older people around the world is that they feel cold in winter or when the room temperature changes. Find Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

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My father, who will be 81 soon, says the cold affects him very badly these days. So much so, that if he moves from a relatively warm room to a cooler temperature, he starts shaking and shivering uncontrollably. In addition he says he feels very cold "inside". - [Helga C.](#), internet question

Perhaps the most common complaint of elderly people who live outside of the subtropical zones of the world is about feeling cold, especially (but not exclusively) in winter.

Within the subtropical zones, older people may feel the heat more than they did when they were younger. (In the tropics, temperatures vary little throughout the year so the body adjusts to whatever the common ambient temperature norm is.)

A search for explanations for why older people feel cold more produces a variety of guesses, always based on the experience of the writer, either with herself or others close to her.

The most common explanation offered is poor circulation. It is true that blood vessels tend to get narrower as people get older. Cholesterol, in some blood vessels, makes the passage through them even smaller. Cholesterol accumulates in arteries, not in veins, and mostly in the core of the body, not in the extremities.

Blood circulation alone could not account for feeling cold, especially in extremities such as hands and feet. So long as blood is flowing to the feet, for example, heat is travelling from the body core to the feet. Where is it going once it reaches the feet? It is obviously not hanging around long enough.

Blood thinners are often labeled as the cause for older people feeling the cold more than younger folks. Thinner blood is needed for those with high blood pressure. Thinner blood should travel faster through blood vessels and people with high blood pressure should have blood pumping near the optimum all the way to the feet. Neither of these should account for cold feet.

My feet and hands sometimes feel extra cold, even when I am in a warmed house. At my age (into traditional retirement years) my blood pressure is on the low side of normal, never high. I do not take blood thinners. Again, if heat from my body core is not having a problem getting to my feet and hands, what is happening to the heat once it gets there?

Skin, particularly the epidermis, the extreme outer layer, gets thinner as people get older. Why?

The extreme outer layer of skin is comprised mostly of dead skin cells. These tend to hang onto what is below better when people are younger because their skin is moister with oil (and water). Younger people have more oil in their skin than older people.

As skin dries out, the outer layer of dead cells tends to flake off, exposing the layers that are underneath. That means the nerves are closer to the surface. The nerves are what make people feel cold (gives the sensation of being cold).

The skin also has fewer dead skin cells to act as insulation to prevent heat from escaping to the outside. Older people may notice dust flying around when they take off socks or put them on. That dust is dead skin cells. House dust itself is comprised mostly of dead skin cells. Older people see their skin getting thinner as they spot skin cells flying off into the air.

Thinner skin exposes feet and hands to ambient (room) air, which is always cooler than body temperature. Heat, as is nature's way, moves from a warmer place to a cooler place, so body heat in the feet and hands escapes through thin skin to the outside, making the person feel cold.

"I hate winter. I can't stand the cold" is a refrain I have heard countless times from elderly people in the cold climate country where I live. Some who can afford it move south to a warmer country during the cold season. Others simply have to bundle up.

Remember that heat escapes quickly from thinner skin, so extra insulation on the parts of the body that get cold should be considered essential.

Note that the core of the body may not feel cold, may not be cold. Warming the whole body just to get the hands and feet warm may not be the wisest choice. Putting the house thermostat up could raise the body's core temperature. Even a tiny rise in core temperature beyond what is normal for that body could have negative effects on health. Body cells and the immune system function best at a constant temperature.

In conclusion, older people feel cold easier than younger people, but the safest choice to make is to add insulation to the cold parts, not to warm the whole body beyond what is necessary.

Bill Allin is the author of *Turning It Around: Causes and Cures for Today's Epidemic Social Problems*, a book of help for parents and teachers of young children. Feeling cold is not a social problem in the usual sense, but as the Baby Boomers reach retirement age, it will become a very common problem.

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