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Cold weather advice for health and social care professionals

Cold weather can pose serious health risks including hypothermia, falls and injuries, heart attacks, strokes, respiratory diseases and flu. Indirect effects of cold include mental health illnesses such as depression, and carbon monoxide poisoning from poorly maintained or poorly ventilated boilers, cooking and heating appliances.

Those most at risk of suffering impacts from cold weather include older people, very young children and people with pre-existing medical conditions, as well as those whose health, housing or economic circumstances put them at greater risk of harm.

Advice

Health and social care colleagues are reminded to implement relevant escalation plans and take appropriate business continuity actions to ensure services are able to cope as best they can with any associated increased demand. We recognise that such plans and actions will differ across Wales, being tailored to local populations, geographies and service structures. However, all should address the following potential issues:

Staff

- Take steps to ensure a 'healthy' front-line workforce.
- Consider deploying more staff or moving staff to deal with expected surges in demand in certain service areas.
- Consider accommodating key staff on-site overnight if transport network disruption anticipated.

Service capacity

- Consider how team/service activities and capacity can be adapted to cope with a possible surge in activity.
- Ensure staff are prompted to signpost vulnerable individuals onwards to relevant services as appropriate.
- Ensure staff undertake home checks when visiting patients and clients e.g. room temperature, medications and food supplies.
- Also consider the needs of carers and the support they can continue to give.
- Implement local plans for contacting vulnerable clients. Consider daily visits or phone calls for high-risk individuals living on their own who have no regular contacts.
- Remind patients/clients of the actions they can take to protect themselves from the effects of severe cold.

Resources

- Ensure supplies of required medications and other equipment is readily available and accessible.
- Consider how potential consequences of disrupted transport links, including disrupted access to patients' homes and care homes and possible delays in pharmaceutical supplies would be dealt with.

Information gathering and support

- Work across agencies to collect information that may inform action to adapt team/service activities and capacity according to need.
- Monitor and analyse information obtained from service activity to identify specific reasons for service pressures so that remedial and preventive action can be undertaken locally.