

Winter facts: how to love winter in Toronto

Wintertime in Toronto may seem a little frightening if you've never experienced snow or cold temperatures before. The following will help you prepare for winter and possibly learn to love it!

Q1. How cold does it actually get during the winter?

In Northern Ontario it can get as cold as -50°C , but the winter in Toronto is much milder. The temperature doesn't usually go below -20°C and the average winter temperature is only -4.6°C .

Q2. How do I get to and from school when it snows?

After a snowfall in Toronto the streets and sidewalks are cleared. It is often even safe enough to ride your bicycle. However, when walking, driving or cycling there may be hard-to-see patches of ice known as black ice that can be very slippery. So, please take your time and be careful.

Q3. What is “wind chill”?

You will often hear two temperatures on winter weather reports in Canada – one is the actual temperature and the other is adjusted to include the wind chill factor. For example, the actual temperature may be -10°C , but with wind chill it is -20°C . This means that outside it will feel like -20°C , even though the thermometer reads -10°C .

Q4. What is frostbite and what causes it?

Frostbite occurs when your skin or tissues freeze like ice. The most commonly affected areas include the hands, feet, ears, nose and face. Some factors that increase the likelihood of frostbite are:

- Long exposure to the cold
- Very low temperatures
- High wind chill factor
- High environmental humidity
- Wet clothing
- Inadequate clothing
- Clothing that is too tight
- Ingestion of alcohol or drugs
- High altitudes

Signs of frostbite

Mild: Blanching or whitening of the skin. Go inside or warm up quickly! Your skin may become red and stay that way for a few hours. It may also swell, itch or burn while you are warming up.

Severe: Waxy skin with a white, greyish-yellow or greyish-blue colour, numbness, blisters, a feeling of the area being frozen or “wooden”. See a medical professional!

Q5: What is hypothermia?

Hypothermia occurs when your core body temperature drops below 35°C (95°F). Normal core body temperature is 37°C (98.6°F). To help prevent hypothermia, dress warmly and cover up!

Signs of hypothermia

Mild: Shivering, goose bumps, numb hands, the inability to perform complex tasks with your hands. These are fairly common symptoms in the winter, but it is still important to warm yourself up as soon as possible.

Moderate: Intense to violent shivering, poor muscle coordination, difficulty speaking, sluggish movements, mild confusion or amnesia, signs of depression.

Severe: Shivering stops, blue and puffy skin, inability to walk, confusion, irrational behaviour, semi-consciousness or unconsciousness, erratic heartbeat and respiration. Death is possible at this stage.

You can safely go out in the cold for extended periods, if you are properly prepared. By dressing warmly and covering up any exposed body parts, you can prevent frostbite.

Q6: Keeping Warm — Which is better: one thick sweater or coat, or several thin layers?

Did you know that several thin layers of clothing can be more effective at keeping you warm than one large, bulky layer? To layer clothing means to wear a several thin clothes on top of one another to keep you warm. The advantage of doing so allows you to take off a layer if you are in a well-heated area or building yet be ready for the colder temperatures outside. You also do not have to wear a large bulky jacket. Layering your clothing also allows you to remove a layer or two if you find you are too warm—this prevents excessive sweating and ultimately keeps you warmer.

Q7: Keeping Warm — What are some examples of layering?

Thermal Underwear: This is worn underneath your regular clothing and is sometimes called long underwear or “long johns”. The best kinds are made from insulating synthetic materials, because they wick moisture away from your skin.

Regular Clothing: Tank tops (sleeveless t-shirts), undershirts, t-shirts or thin long-sleeve shirts can be worn underneath sweaters, sweatshirts, cardigans or other shirts. You can also wear tights or leggings under your pants.

Socks: Wool socks or thermal socks will keep your feet nice and warm. You can also put a thin pair of socks underneath your wool socks for extra warmth, if it gets really cold.

Q8: Keeping Warm — Covering your extremities

When it's cold outside, it is very important to cover any exposed skin. This includes your head, neck, hands and feet.

Head: Wear a warm hat, hood, earmuffs, headband or face mask. Sometimes if you are wearing many layers but still feel cold, a hat on your head will warm you up!

Neck: Wear a turtleneck shirt or scarf. Some winter coats come with hoods or high collars that also help to keep your neck warm.

Hands: Wear a warm pair of gloves or mittens. Mittens are warmer, but limit what you can do with your hands.

Feet: Wear warm socks and boots that cover your ankles. Make sure your socks and boots aren't too tight, as this can actually make you colder!

Q9: What is a tuque?

A tuque is a knit winter hat (sometimes spelled as touque or toque). Some types are fitted to the shape of your head, some have a floppy top that hangs down with a soft tassel or pompom at the end and some come down below the ears and have strings—all of them keep you warm!

Q10: Keeping Warm — What should I consider when buying a winter coat?

Basic things to think about when looking for a winter coat:

- Your budget
- Your tolerance for cold temperatures
- How long you will be in Canada
- How much time you will spend outdoors
- There are a number of options available to you when it comes to buying a coat. If you are on a tight budget, consider second hand stores.

Q11: Keeping Warm — What makes a good winter coat?

Your choice of winter coat will depend on the factors covered in Q10, but here are some features of winter coats to keep in mind.

Outer Shell: This should be a wind & water resistant fabric (e.g., nylon). This is especially important if you plan on participating in winter sports.

Inner Lining: This should be an insulated fabric like fleece.

Size and Length: Take into consideration how many layers you will be wearing under your coat and whether or not your coat will be able to accommodate them. Your coat should still cover your wrists when your arms are fully extended. Consider also the length of your coat—a longer coat will keep you warmer than one that stops at your waist.

Buttons and Zippers: Can you move freely and sit down comfortably with your buttons and zippers done up? How much of your neck is covered when the coat is done all the way up?

Collar and Hood: If there is a collar and/ or hood, does it protect the back of your neck? If the hood is too small, it may come off easily. If the hood is too big, it may prevent you from seeing and hearing properly. Many hoods have an adjustable strap running up the back or drawstrings at the front, so that you can get a better fit.

Drawstrings: If there are drawstrings at the waist or neck of the coat, make sure they aren't too long as they may get caught in various places.

Cold Drafts: Cold drafts can enter your coat through the sleeve openings, the top or bottom of the coat, through the zipper or buttons or through the fabric itself. Make sure your coat does not gape and that it is made from a tightly knit or wind resistant fabric.

Q12: What is a parka?

A parka is a heavy winter coat with a hood. It covers below your hips, zips up to cover your neck and sometimes covers your mouth and nose. A parka is usually lined with down (feathers) or another insulating material that helps maintain warmth. The hood is often also insulated and is sometimes lined with fur along the outside edge of the hood to help protect your face.

Q13: How can I adjust to the winter environment?

Here are some common problems that arise in the winter, along with proposed solutions.

Problem: Lack of fresh air indoors. **Solution:** Go for a short walk outdoors.

Problem: Dry heat indoors. **Solution:** Use a humidifier and/or place some plants in the room.

Problem: Dry skin. **Solution:** Drink lots of water and regularly apply skin cream and lip balm.

Problem: Changes in temperature and shock to the body. **Solution:** Wear lots of layers. Remove or replace layers as you move between colder and warmer environments.

Q14: Winter Blues — What is this?

Sometimes during the height of winter people describe themselves as feeling “a little blah.” This could mean a number of things: it could describe not feeling quite yourself, feeling a little more tired or sluggish than usual, feeling a bit down or less energetic than usual, among other possibilities. A more severe version of the winter blahs or blues is SAD or Seasonal Affective Disorder.

Q15: What causes the winter blues?

Many things can contribute to the winter blues, but it is generally thought that seasonal variations in light and prolonged periods of cold are the main contributors. The most difficult months are usually January and February because those are the coldest days of the year, and also have the least amount of sunshine per day.

Q16: What to do about the winter blues?

Many people find that they can reduce the feeling of the winter blues simply making self-care a priority. Things like sleeping enough, eating a balanced diet, getting together with friends, and getting outside by participating in winter activities can all help to reduce the impact of the winter blues. Remember, the winter will end, although it doesn't always feel that way. However, if you suspect that your feelings are more severe than just the blahs/blues, you should make contact with a health professional. Some options are Health & Wellness, your family doctor or local walk-in clinic.

Learn about Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD):

- [The Mayo Clinic on SAD](#)
- [U of T News on SAD](#)
- [The Varsity on SAD](#)

Q17: What are some activities I can do during the winter?

- Indoor or outdoor ice skating
- Skiing and snowboarding
- Winter carnivals
- Trip to Niagara Falls
- Tobogganing in city parks

Q18: When can I expect the first snow?

The first snowfall in Toronto usually happens toward the end of November, but it is very light and usually melts away the same day. Cities north of Toronto, like Barrie for example, may get their first snowfall toward the end of October. In Toronto, heavier snowfalls usually happen between December and February, although it does not snow every day. Snow season usually finishes by the end of March.

Q19: Where can I look up the weather forecast?

The Weather Network and Environment Canada both have websites where you can check the weather forecast. In addition, The Weather Network has a twenty-four hour television channel on cable television.

You can also find weather reports in the daily newspapers and on television and radio news casts.

Need new gear? Suggestions for where to find what you need in Toronto.

Thrift, vintage, overstock, used goods: Check out places like second-hand stores on Queen West or vintage stores in Kensington Market. You might even find Facebook groups that allow trades or second-hand sales for great prices.

Expect to find coats in the range of \$50 – \$70 and boots for \$20 – \$70.

Pro-tip: Check for tears, poorly sewn linings and sufficient stuffing in coats.

New, but affordable gear: Head to local malls or stores on Yonge Street to find stores that stock cold weather items.

Expect to find coats in the range of \$100 – \$200 and boots from \$40 – 100.

Pro-tip: Look for sales. These are great places to find good boots, mid-layer jackets, thermal underwear, leggings, scarves, hats and warm socks.

New gear that's more expensive: Places like malls and stores on Bloor Street sell winter wear that's on the pricier side, but good quality.

Expect to find coats in the range of \$200 – \$450 and boots from \$100 – \$300.

Pro-tip: Keep an eye out for sales and remember that items in this category usually come with solid weather ratings and warranties.

Investment pieces: There some brands out there that come with excellent weather ratings and warranties, but are a definite investment. You'll find them at select retailers on Queen West, Bloor Street, in malls or online.

Expect to find coats from \$650 – \$1,000 or more, and boots starting at \$400 and up.

Pro-tip: High-priced brands may keep you warm in very cold temperatures with just one or two layers underneath, but less expensive coats work just as well if you layer up!

