

BY RICHARD GLENN

## SIX WAYS TO AVOID COLD FEET



Two ways to keep warm: drink water and wear plastic under your socks.

**N**othing is more likely to turn a cold-weather venture outdoors into an unhappy experience than inadequately protected feet. Though these lower extremities are often taken for granted, they are your sole support, so it's vital to take care of them before you go out into winter weather.

The pain of cold feet is part of a highly developed survival mechanism centered around the brain. When your brain feels the cold creeping into your toes, it cuts off the warm blood supply to your feet in order to protect the rest of your body from the invading chill. While this may be good for the rest of you, it's very hard on your toes. You can prevent this uncomfortable, possibly dangerous situation by following these six easy steps.

1. **Drink plenty of water.** Letting your body dehydrate is a predisposing factor leading to cold feet. Winter sucks the moisture out of your body at an alarming rate—you sweat it out under bulky clothing, breathe it out in great clouds of vapor, and pass it out through increased urination. Don't wait to feel thirsty. The cold blunts your thirst mechanism, and by the time you want to drink, your fluid level is already dangerously low. Much of the fluid loss is from your circulatory system,

*Richard Glenn lives in New Hampshire and teaches outdoor emergency medicine.*

The chill that invades your winter boots can be prevented before you leave the comfort of your home.

which is why your feet become cold. Drinking a gallon of water a day is not unreasonable if you want to insure cozy toes.

2. **Keep your feet loose in their boots.** If anything is more common than dehydration, it's cramming too many pairs of socks into too little space, which causes reduced circulation. Winter boots should be one, even two sizes bigger than summer boots. Your feet want to be well-insulated with layers of socks, but they should feel loose.

3. **Wear a vapor barrier.** Damp socks mean cold feet. Keep moisture from evaporating off your feet and soaking into your socks. Put your naked feet into a plastic bag or wear a thin polypropylene sock next to your skin. The sock should be one that wicks the wetness just far enough away from your skin to make you feel comfortable. Over the plastic put enough layers of thick dry socks to ensure insulation but avoid cramming your boots. If your boots are not waterproof, wear another layer of plastic over your socks to keep them dry.

A further note on vapor barriers: if you're staying out overnight, take them off and dry your feet thoroughly as soon as camp is set. Letting your skin stay wet is hard on feet and can lead to complications like immersion foot (a painful cold-and-wet-induced injury).

4. **Quit smoking,** at least just before and during a trip into the cold outdoors. Smoking causes acute vasoconstriction (a shrinking of the blood vessels in your feet), which is a reaction to the chemicals you inhale. Reduced vessel size equals reduced circulation.

5. **Use an anti-perspirant on your feet.** Although this isn't for everybody, some people whose feet sweat profusely report that they are more comfortable with an anti-perspirant rubbed into

their skin. Others say it just makes their feet feel sticky. Still others prefer a foot powder, but powders tend to cake up, clog your socks, and require several re-applications during a long walk.

6. **Wear a warm hat.** When the brain is kept warm with its own added insulation, the feet are rewarded with more circulation.

So, now you're ready to go. But first, a word of warning. It is difficult to distinguish between simple numb toes and frostbite. Don't take chances and run the risk of a debilitating and permanent frostbite injury. When numbness sets in, stop and rewarm your feet. Passive skin-to-skin rewarming is the safest and best method, and a fine way to discover who your real friends are. Sit on something to insulate you from the ground, take off your boot, and press your cold toes against the bare skin of someone's abdomen, right up underneath his clothing. In the meantime, stuff your boot underneath your own parka to keep it from freezing. Your feet (if not your friend) will thank you in the long run.

