



Cold Homes and Your Health

What is a cold home?

A cold home is one where the temperature is too low to support the health and wellbeing of those who live there.

The World Health Organization (WHO) [1] tells us that homes are cold when they are less than 18 degrees. Homes can also be considered cold up to 21 degrees [2] if the occupants are aged, affected by medical conditions such as heart trouble or asthma, or have limited mobility.

Can less than 18 degrees be OK?

Homes only really need to be warm when we are there. If you are very active, or have warm bed coverings, you might be comfortable at less than 18 degrees.

How many Australian homes are unhealthily cold?

Studies of homes in temperate Australia showed that around one third of homes had temperatures below 18 degrees over winter. Similarly, 28% of people are unable to stay comfortably warm [3] in winter, with 27% of people unable to adequately heat their home due to financial reasons.

What is energy poverty?

When you cannot afford to adequately heat or cool your home, this is energy poverty [4]. Energy poverty is affected by your income as well as other expenses you might have, such as medical bills and housing cost.

Homes in poor condition also cost more to heat, because much of the heat escapes to the outside environment. This means that people in poor-condition housing are more likely to experience energy poverty.

How can a cold home affect my health?

The WHO has based their advice on health evidence. Below 18 degrees, your risk of high blood pressure [5] increases. You are also more likely to suffer breathing difficulties [2]. Additionally, being in a home that feels cold can affect your mental health and your overall wellbeing [4]. This is especially the case when people don't feel like they have good, affordable options for staying warm.



Who is most affected?

- ❖ People who live in homes that are in poor condition [6] are most affected by cold. A well-sealed, well-insulated home is best at keeping the heat inside in winter.
- ❖ Those who are renting [7] are more at risk, because they have less control over home features like heating systems, insulation and maintenance.
- ❖ The very old, the very young, people living with a disability and those with existing illnesses are most susceptible to the health impacts of living in cold homes; they also tend to be the ones living in some of our coldest homes.

How can I make my home warmer?

If you own your home, consider adding or upgrading your insulation. Installing a reverse-cycle air conditioner will give you more efficient heating than many other heater types.

If you are renting, there are still ways to improve your warmth [7]. Try to seal off rooms that are not in use, to keep the heat where you need it most. Much of the heat escapes through windows. Keep blinds closed when it isn't sunny outside and upgrade your curtains to thermal-lined varieties that cover windows completely. If it is sunny, let the sunshine in!

Stopping draughts will help you stay warm. Seal cracks with silicon and use weather strips or door snakes to seal under doors.

If you have gas heating, remember that you need to make sure that your home is adequately ventilated.



- [1] World Health Organisation. (2018) *Housing and health guidelines*.
- [2] Osman, L.M., Ayres, J.G., Garden, C., Reglitz, K., Lyon, J., & Douglas, J.G. (2008) Home warmth and health status of COPD patients, *European Journal of Public Health*. doi: 10.1093/eurpub/ckn015.
- [3] The Australian Centre for Housing Research. (2021) *Cold in Australian homes*.
- [4] Daniel, L., Baker, E., Beer, A., & Pham, N.T.A. (2021) Cold housing: evidence, risk and vulnerability. *Housing Studies*. doi: 10.1080/02673037.2019.1686130.
- [5] Loyd, E.L., McCormack, C., McKeever, M., & Syme, M. (2008) The effect of improving the thermal quality of cold housing on blood pressure and general health: a research note. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*. doi: 10.1136/jech.2007.067835.
- [6] Baker, E., Daniel, L., Bentley, R., Pawson, H., Stone, W., Rajagopalan, P., Hulse, K., Beer, A., London, K., Zillante G., Randolph, B. (2018) *The Australian Housing Conditions Dataset: technical report*. Healthy Cities Research - The University of Adelaide.
- [7] Isley, C.F., Baker, E., Daniel, L., Moore, T. (2022) *If you're renting, chances are your home is cold. With power prices soaring, here's what you can do to keep warm*, The Conversation.

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