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Walk Like a Penguin... and Other December Tips

“Oh, the weather outside is frightful!” are the lyrics of the song “Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!” written by Sammy Cahn and composer July Styne in 1945. We’re certainly experiencing some of those sentiments these days in Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster Counties! If we must go outside – we should at least try to stay upright and reduce chances of injuring ourselves.

Here are some tips to reduce falls in winter, brought to us by Falls Free (Nebraska Older Adult Falls Coalition), Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, and South Heartland District Health Department:

1. Focus on Footwear: Rubber soles, especially those with plenty of tread, provide better traction on snow and ice than either leather or plastic soles, making them the best selection.
2. Beware of Black Ice: It’s just as slippery as regular ice, but difficult to see, making it a top winter safety concern. Stay on clear pathways or ones that have been treated with sand or salt.
3. Make Winter Safety a Priority: Avoid rushing and allow yourself extra time to reach your destination safely. Avoid short-cuts through snow or over icy areas.
4. Walk Like a Penguin: When walking on ground that is slippery with ice or snow – take short, shuffling steps, curl your toes under and walk flatfooted.

Let’s all practice walking like a penguin to increase our safety when navigating hazardous icy surfaces!

Speaking of hazards, December is National Impaired Driving Prevention Month. Beginning in 1981 under President Ronald Reagan, every president of the United States has demonstrated the commitment to preventing impaired driving by proclaiming December as National Drunk & Drugged Driving Prevention Month or, more recently, National Impaired Driving Prevention Month.

In his proclamation on November 30, 2018, President Donald Trump summarized the extent of the issue and the reasons for concern: “Operating a vehicle while under the influence of alcohol, illicit drugs, or certain medications can have devastating consequences. In 2017, more than 10,000 people died in alcohol-related crashes in the United States, accounting for 29 percent of all traffic fatalities. Drunk or drugged drivers experience diminished judgment and decreased motor coordination and reaction time, putting at grave risk passengers, pedestrians, and other drivers.”

He also suggested that “Every American can take a few simple steps to make our roads safer. We hope every driver commits to making responsible and safe decisions when driving, including driving sober, finding a designated driver, and keeping loved ones from getting behind the wheel while impaired.”

These are wise words as we enter a month with events that often include alcohol. Traffic fatalities that involve impaired drivers increase significantly during the Christmas and New Year's holiday periods.

If you are hosting or attending holiday parties this year, check out these six tips from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to help prevent dangerous alcohol use and impaired driving, and to help yourself and your guests to be safe:

1. Avoid making alcohol the main focus of social events. Enjoy holiday parties through music, dancing, games, food, and lively conversation.
2. Be sure to offer plenty of nonalcoholic choices such as sparkling water, fancy juice, soft drinks, and bottled drinking water.
3. Stop serving drinks at least 1 hour before the end of the event. Instead, serve coffee, non-alcoholic beverages and desserts at that time.
4. Avoid salty foods, which are known to encourage people to drink more. Serve high protein and carbohydrate foods, such as cheese and meats, which can help to slow the effects of alcohol.
5. Recruit designated drivers ahead of time to make sure that everyone has a safe ride home. Be prepared to offer or use other transportation such as cabs or "safe ride" programs in your area; keep the phone numbers of local cab services on hand for yourself and guests.
6. Finally, don't be afraid to stop a friend or loved one from getting behind the wheel.

On a related note, stress can be a factor for both falls and impaired driving. The Mayo Clinic Staff put together a list of ten "Tips to prevent holiday stress and depression." Here are two of those tips:

1. Don't abandon healthy habits - Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. So take steps to:
 - Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks.
 - Get plenty of sleep.
 - Incorporate regular physical activity into each day.
2. Take a breather - Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm, such as listening to soothing music, getting a massage, or reading a book.

We challenge you to put one or more of these tips into practice this December to reduce falls, to prevent impaired driving, and to reduce stress. Here's (cheers!) to a happy and safe holiday season!

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