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SALIENT FACTS

Chilling Effect

Just in time for winter, if it ever comes — a new wind chill index.

WHY IS THE WIND CHILL FACTOR ALWAYS SO COLD?

Remember all those times the weatherman warned of a wind chill factor of minus 40 degrees, yet you survived? Well, the National Weather Service has just rolled out a new wind chill index that promises to be more in line with people's own experience of cold. The first index, devised in 1945 by a pair of Antarctic explorers, tended to produce extreme results — in part because it used wind speed as measured 33 feet up and in part because it assumed that people walk straight into the wind at a very brisk four miles an hour.

WHAT'S BETTER ABOUT THE NEW INDEX?

In addition to correcting those errors, the new index uses "modern heat transfer theory," or the latest available science on how cold affects skin temperature. In the old index, a wind speed of 25 miles per hour at a temperature of 5 degrees yielded a forbidding 35-below wind chill temperature. Under the new index, the same conditions give you a much balmier 15 below.

HOW DO WE KNOW IT'S BETTER?

We asked some Canadians. Last spring, National Weather Service researchers put 12 Toronto volunteers in a refrigerated wind tunnel (above). They were subjected to extreme cold and winds, and to keep things lively, they were sprayed with water. Meanwhile, their body temperatures were monitored through facial sensors and anal probes. The experiences of these miserable, icy, freezing wind-whipped volunteers confirmed the obvious. Says Mark Tew of the National Weather Service: "We did find that if you have spray on your face, the wind chill temperature calculation is going to be even colder."

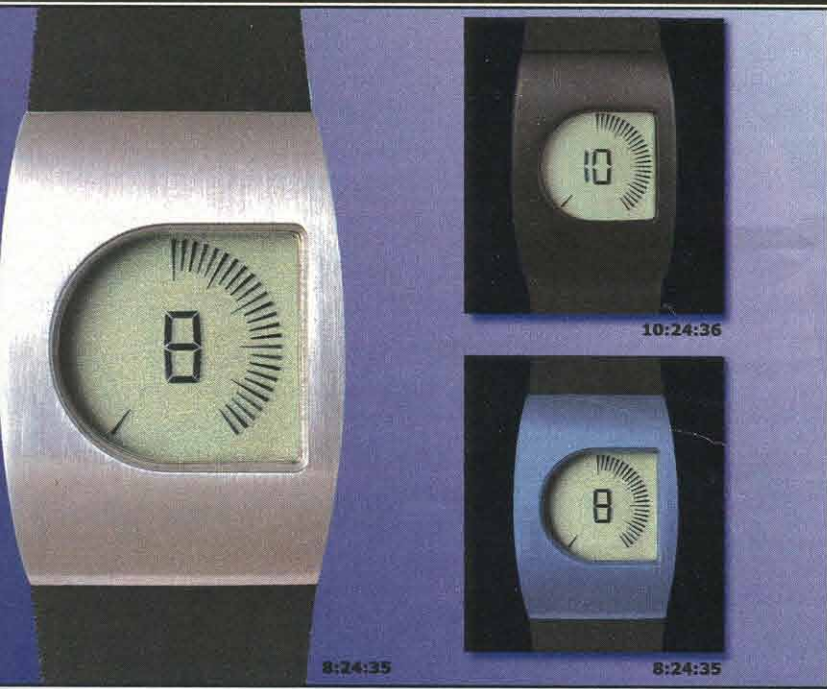
IS A BIT OF HEFT STILL THE BEST INSULATION?

Not according to the latest findings. "Fitter people are able to hold up to wind chill more than unfit people," Tew says. "Thinner skin keeps the outside of the skin a little bit warmer than if you had thicker skin tissue." Researchers incorporated this information into the new index by using what they call a "consistent standard for skin tissue resistance," which is a nice way of saying they assumed everyone is a little out of shape. "We went with the worst-case scenario."

John Cook

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