

Heatwave

Heatwave – Why is it a problem?

The main risks posed by a heatwave are:

- dehydration (not having enough water);
- overheating, which can make symptoms worse for people who already have problems with their heart or breathing;
- heat exhaustion and heatstroke (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/heat-exhaustion-heatstroke/>).

Who is most at risk?

A heatwave can affect anyone, but the most vulnerable people are:

- older people, especially those over 75;
- babies and young children;
- people with a serious chronic condition, especially heart or breathing problems;
- people with mobility problems – for example, people with Parkinson's disease or who have had a stroke;
- people with serious mental health problems;
- people on certain medications, including those that affect sweating and temperature control;
- people who misuse alcohol or drugs;
- people who are physically active – for example, labourers or those doing sports.

Tips for coping in hot weather

- shut windows and pull down the shades when it is hotter outside. You can open the windows for ventilation when it is cooler;
- avoid the heat: stay out of the sun and don't go out between 11am and 3pm (the hottest part of the day) if you're vulnerable to the effects of heat;

- keep rooms cool by using shades or reflective material outside the windows. If this isn't possible, use light-coloured curtains and keep them closed (metallic blinds and dark curtains can make the room hotter);
- have cool baths or showers, and splash yourself with cool water;
- drink plenty of fluids and avoid excess alcohol – water, lower-fat milks and tea and coffee are good options. You can also drink fruit juice, smoothies and soft drinks, but they can be high in sugar. Limit fruit juice or smoothies to a combined total of 150ml a day, and choose diet or sugar-free soft drinks;
- listen to alerts on the radio, TV and social media about keeping cool;
- plan ahead to make sure you have enough supplies, such as food, water and any medications you need;
- identify the coolest room in the house so you know where to go to keep cool;
- wear loose, cool clothing, and a hat and sunglasses if you go outdoors;
- check up on friends, relatives and neighbours who may be less able to look after themselves.

If you have concerns about an uncomfortably hot house that is affecting your health or someone else's, get medical advice. You can also get help from the environmental health office at your local authority. They can inspect a home for hazards to health, including excess heat. Visit GOV.UK to [find your local authority](#).

What do I do if I think I'm dehydrated?

"Grab yourself a drink," says Dr. Kim. "For mild dehydration, it's best to drink small sips of water and often, rather than trying to drink a lot all in one go because this may make you vomit. "

"If your dehydration causes you to have diarrhoea or vomit, you'll also be losing important salts and sugars from your body. A good way to replace these is with rehydration sachets, which you can buy over the counter. Some people choose sports drinks but these contain much more sugar than you need so it's best to stick to rehydration sachets."

"If you have more severe dehydration, visit your GP for advice." **How to keep cool in the heat...**

There are an infinite number of ways, however the tips below are a good place to start. Most important of all though is to remember to wear sunscreen if you're planning to be outside.

- Carry around an ice pack or, if you don't have one, a frozen drink. It might not be practical - it'll drip as it melts - but it's guaranteed to instantly cool you down;
- Run your wrists under cold water - that'll help to cool the blood;

- This isn't rocket science but wear loose cotton clothes in light colours. Cotton is lightweight and breathable - synthetic fibres trap heat - and it also absorbs sweat. Light colours too reflect the sun's radiation;
- Use something to fan yourself that isn't your hands. The flapping motion not only uses up energy but will likely make you hotter in the process as well.
- If you don't own a fan, use paper or something flexible; anything that doesn't require too much work to get the air moving.

Heat Stress and Older People

- People aged 65 years and over are at increased risk of heat-related illnesses and need special care in hot weather:
- Risk factors include living alone, chronic medical problems and certain medications;
- Take steps to prevent heat stress on days when the temperature is predicted to rise above 30°C or so;
- Heat stress may affect older people more than others. Some people aged 65 years and over may be at increased risk of heat-related illnesses and need special care in hot weather. Risk factors include living alone, chronic medical problems and certain medications;
- Heat stress occurs when the body can't cool itself and maintain a healthy temperature. The body normally cools itself by sweating, but sometimes sweating isn't enough and the body temperature keeps rising. Heat stress is also known as hyperthermia;
- Heat-related illnesses range from mild conditions such as a rash or cramps to serious and potentially life-threatening conditions such as heatstroke.

Self-help suggestions for the elderly to avoid heat stress

It's important to be sensible in hot weather, for example, stay indoors, avoid strenuous activity, wear lightweight clothing, and drink cool water regularly throughout the day.

Other simple measures that can reduce your risk of heat stress include:

- **Pay attention to weather reports** – temperatures above 37 °C are particularly dangerous. Act to prevent heat stress on days when the temperature is predicted to rise above 30 °C. Take note of humidity levels too, because sweating is not as effective at cooling you down when the weather is very humid;
- **Review medications with your doctor** – if you take medications, ask your doctor if you are at increased risk of heat stress in hot weather. The doctor may advise that you avoid certain medications or adjust the dosage during the summer months;

- **Reduce caffeine and alcohol** – caffeinated and alcoholic drinks have a mild diuretic action. Limit tea, coffee and alcohol in hot weather;
- **Take note of the colour of your urine** – brown or dark yellow urine suggests dehydration;
- **Stay cool** – draw your blinds and curtains, and turn on your air conditioner and set it to 'cool'. If you do not have an air conditioner, try cool showers or use wet towels and sit in front of an electric fan;
- **Self-help** - suggestions for the elderly to avoid heat stress It's important to be sensible in hot weather, for example, stay indoors, avoid strenuous activity, wear lightweight clothing, and drink cool water regularly throughout the day.

Dehydration and overheating

- Extreme heat and dry conditions can cause you to dehydrate and your body to overheat;
- It's important to eat a balanced diet to help your body replace any salt you lose by sweating. Aim to drink 6 – 8 glasses of liquid a day, and more if it's hot;
- You may also need to be careful if you're taking some types of medication that affect water retention. Speak to your doctor if you're concerned;
- Watch out for certain signs – particularly for muscle cramps in your arms, legs or stomach, mild confusion, weakness or sleep problems. If you have any of these, rest in a cool place and drink plenty of fluids. Seek medical advice if your symptoms persist or worsen.

Heat exhaustion and heatstroke

The symptoms of heat exhaustion include headaches, dizziness, nausea or vomiting, intense thirst, heavy sweating and a fast pulse.

If you have any of these symptoms you must, if at all possible:

- find a cool place and loosen tight clothes
- drink plenty of water or fruit juice
- sponge yourself with cool water or have a cool shower.

Your symptoms should improve within 30 minutes. If you're feeling better but still have any concerns, call your doctor or NHS 111 for advice. Heatstroke can develop if heat exhaustion is left untreated – it can also develop suddenly and without warning.

The symptoms of heatstroke include confusion, disorientation, seizures and loss of consciousness.

Heatstroke is a life-threatening condition. If you or someone else shows symptoms:

- call 999 immediately, or 112 if you are in the European Union (you can call 112 from a mobile for free)

- if you have a community alarm, press the button on your pendant to call for help
- while waiting for the ambulance, follow the advice given for heat exhaustion but do not try to give fluids to anyone who is unconscious. 65 years and over are at increased risk of heat-related illnesses and need special care in hot weather.

For further information please visit:

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/heat-stress-and-older-people>

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/heatwave-how-to-cope-in-hot-weather/>

<https://www.age.uk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/mind-body/stayingcool-in-aheatwave/>