

Beat the heat: facts about heat-related illness

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Heatwaves can be among the most life-threatening and yet understated of natural disasters. Proper hydration, cooling and early recognition of heat-related illness can save lives.

Causes

Our bodies make heat when we work, exercise or even sleep. If we do not get rid of this heat via our skin, our body processes can go too fast or slow. When the air temperature is very warm, we rely on sweating to cool off. Older people and those with particular diseases can lose this ability. We can also become severely dehydrated and low on essential salts.

People with heart, lung or kidney disease and those who are overweight or have psychiatric conditions are at increased risk of the effects of being hot and dehydrated. Some medications can also make you more sensitive to heat – ask your doctor about any you might be taking.

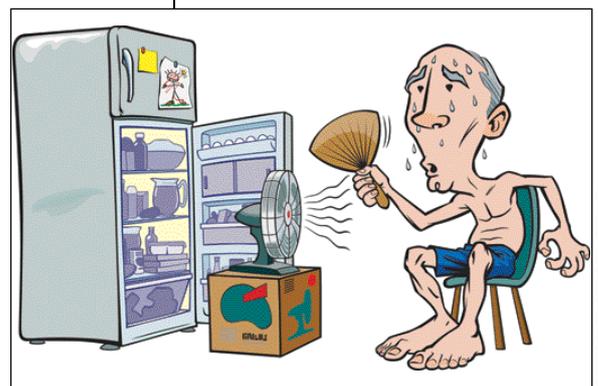
Young children, the elderly and those with disabilities are particularly at risk as they may have difficulty accessing cooling and fluids or calling for help.

Types of heat illnesses

- Heat stress is a feeling of unwellness due to exposure to high temperatures. Nausea and not feeling 'quite right' are common complaints. Muscle cramps can also occur and may be related to salt loss.
- Heat exhaustion is a more serious version of heat stress, with symptoms including lethargy, dizziness, palpitations, nausea/vomiting and headache.
- Heat stroke is the most severe form of heat illness, and the brain is affected, which leads to confusion, agitation, drowsiness, odd behaviour, hallucinations, seizures or slurred speech. People with heat stroke may also have difficulty breathing.

Heat stroke is an emergency – call 000

This handout provides information about how to manage heat-related illness and emphasises the importance of its prevention.



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Complications

Heart, lung and kidney diseases and psychiatric disorders can also deteriorate when the weather is hot. If your symptoms worsen, see your GP or go to hospital.

Heat exhaustion and heat stroke can be very dangerous. Heart attacks, liver and lung damage, muscle breakdown, bleeding and kidney failure can result and must be treated in hospital to prevent death.

First aid for heat-related illness and its complications

- If the person has signs of serious heat-related illness, has chest pain or collapses, call an ambulance on 000.
- Lie the person down in the shade and remove excess clothing.
- Measure the person's temperature if possible.
- Cool the person with a fan and water sprayed over exposed skin, or with ice in the groin and arm pits.
- Encourage the person to drink sports drinks or water (up to a litre per hour) provided the person is not confused or drowsy.
- Advise the person to go to his or her GP or the hospital if symptoms persist.

Prevention: protect yourself and your family

- Avoid exercise and physical work in hot, humid conditions where possible.
- If you must work, take frequent breaks and keep well hydrated with fluid and salts – e.g. water or sports drinks without excessive sugar.
- Keep cool using:
 - air-conditioning, e.g. visit shopping centres
 - spraying water on the skin
 - fans, but don't blow hot air on dry skin.
- Check up on isolated family or friends regularly as most deaths during heatwaves happen at home.
- If you have multiple medical problems, see your doctor in the spring for a check-up.
- Everyone should increase their fluid intake during hot weather, but consult your doctor if the amount you drink is normally restricted.

Further information

For more information on heat-related illness, visit the website:
<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/extremeheat>, or ask your doctor.

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