

Health Bulletin

Heat safety for older adults



Extreme heat can affect daily activities, as well as be a serious risk to health and wellbeing.

People aged 65 years and over are at an increased risk of heat-related illnesses and need special care in hot weather.

Planning ahead and following simple advice can minimise the risk of heat illness during hot weather.

What is heat illness?

Heat-related illnesses include dehydration, heat cramps, heat exhaustion, heat stroke and worsening of existing medical conditions. Medical conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, or kidney disease and certain medications, may make heat illness symptoms worse.

Symptoms

- Light headedness, dizziness.
- Ashen grey pale skin.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Obvious fatigue.
- Muscle cramps.
- Confusion.
- Aggressive or irrational behaviour.
- Altered consciousness.
- Fainting.
- Excessive sweating or no sweating with high temperature.
- Urinating less often.
- Headache.
- Very high body temperature.
- Increased heart rate.

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Prevention

- Take steps to prevent heat stress on days when the temperature is predicted to rise above 30°C.
- Review conditions and medications with a doctor to see if an increased risk of heat stress is likely. Certain medications may need to be avoided or dosages adjusted during summer months.
- Hydrate – drink a glass of water every hour (10–12 glasses per day).
- Limit tea, coffee and alcohol in hot weather.
- Eat smaller meals more often. Cold meals, such as salads and fruit, help keep water levels up.
- Observe urine colour – brown or dark yellow suggests dehydration.
- Stay cool – draw the blinds, turn on the air conditioner/fan, have cool showers, visit air-conditioned local libraries/shopping centres.
- Limit activity and rest under shade or indoors, especially during the hottest part of the day.
- Wear lightweight, loose-fitting clothing, preferably made from natural fibres like cotton or linen that absorb sweat and allow the skin to breathe. Avoid synthetic fabrics.
- If going outdoors, even for a short time, always apply sunscreen, wear a wide brim hat that covers the head and shades the face, and wear sunglasses (remember to take them off before going inside and pause to let your eyes adjust from the bright sunlight).
- Have access to a phone that works if there is a power failure. Those with a safety alarm pendant need to make sure it will work if the power goes off.
- If you use a wheelchair, walker or any other metal equipment, keep it in the shade as it can quickly become hot to touch and cause a burn.
- Plan ahead – ask a friend or family member to check on you twice a day if possible during hot weather, especially if you live alone.

Treatment

If you think you may be suffering from heat stress, you need to cool yourself down immediately. Stop your activity and rest. Lie down in a cool environment and apply a cool compress. Hydrate with water.

Call a doctor or an ambulance if your condition does not improve after taking steps to cool down, or if you have any heat-related symptoms that are causing concern.

Where to get help

- A doctor.
- In an emergency, call triple zero (000).
- NURSE-ON-CALL, 1300 60 60 24 for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days).

Sources: Better Health Channel, Heat stress and older people, <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/heat-stress-and-older-people>; Department of Health, Healthy WA, Heat stress in older people, http://healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/F_1/Heat-stress-in-older-people; NSW Government, Heat related illness including heat stroke, <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/environment/factsheets/Pages/heat-related-illness.aspx>; Australian Red Cross, Coping with hot weather, http://www.redcross.org.au/files/2014_RED_Fact_Sheet_Heat_Waves_v3.pdf; Sports Medicine Australia, Beat the heat, <http://sma.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/beat-the-heat-2011.pdf>

Information for carers

To avoid heat stress:

Ask.

Ask for a copy of your patient's information including emergency contact information, medication list and medical conditions, and telephone numbers of doctors/specialists.

Check.

Check on patients frequently and look for signs of heat stress.

Take.

Take those with no air conditioning to an air conditioned place such as a shopping centre or library for respite.

Ensure.

Ensure a patient's home has adequate ventilation. Use electric fans to create air movement to help evaporate sweat from the skin and cool the body.

Disclaimer: This information is not intended to replace medical advice from a health professional. Readers are urged to seek advice from a qualified health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions. Baptcare is a leading, faith-based, not-for-profit organisation working across Victoria and Tasmania, providing care to the community for more than 70 years.