

## Heat stress

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 drugs.

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 heat stroke.

These effects can build up over a number of days as you become exhausted from the heat. This can worsen heart disease and other chronic health conditions you may have.

### Risk factors for heat stress in the elderly

Factors that increase the risk of heat stress in elderly people include:

**Self-care problems** – some older people are frail or have reduced mobility or mental illness. These factors make it difficult for the person to take adequate care in hot weather.

**Living alone** – there is no one to take care of the person if the person ignores symptoms.

**Physical changes** – the ageing body doesn't cope with sudden stresses as quickly as a younger body. For example, on hot days, elderly skin is not able to produce sweat and cool the body as efficiently as younger skin.

**Kidney conditions** – if you take medications for kidney problems, you need to talk to your doctor before you increase the amount of fluid you drink.

### If you have a health condition or take medication

Your risk of heat stress during hot weather can be increased by:

- some health conditions, for example heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes
- certain medications taken for these conditions, including medications for insomnia, depression, anxiety, or poor circulation.

Talk to your doctor so you are aware of your risks and how you should look after yourself.

If you take prescription medication, you must continue to take it during hot weather. Some medication can make you more likely to experience sunburn and heat stress, so watch for signs that you are becoming affected by the heat.

Speak to your doctor or a chemist if you need advice on a particular medication.

## Keep cool

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 as sweating is not as effective at cooling you down when the weather is very humid.

Prepare your home. Use blinds and curtains to avoid direct sunlight.

Use fans if there is adequate ventilation. Make sure the room you are in has an open door or window so fresh air can flow through the room.

If the house is hot, turn on your air conditioner if you have one. Make sure it is set to 'cool' before turning it on. If you are worried about the cost of using your air conditioner, look into what concessions (rebates) may be available on your energy bills.

Visiting air conditioned local libraries or shopping centres can also offer some relief from the heat.

### Try these simple measures to keep cool:

- Rinse a cloth in cool water and use it to wipe your arms and neck.
- Sleep with just a sheet over you.
- Put your feet in a bowl of cool water.
- Make ice cubes from water or cordial and suck them.
- Put a bowl of ice cubes in front of a fan to create a cool breeze.
- Reduce physical activity.
- Use a spray bottle filled with water to cool your face and body.
- Never leave anyone in a closed car.

### When outdoors:

- Wear lightweight, loose-fitting clothing,
- made from natural fibres like cotton or linen that absorb sweat and allow the skin to breathe. Avoid synthetic fabrics.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat that covers your head and shades your face. Caps do not provide adequate sun protection.
- Apply sunscreen at regular intervals
- Avoid outdoor activity during the hottest part of the day.
- If possible, stay in shaded areas
- 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.
- wear sunglasses (remember to take your sunglasses off before going inside and then pause to let your eyes adjust from the bright sunlight).

## Eating and drinking:

- Make sure you drink plenty of fluids, even if you do not feel thirsty, unless your doctor has advised you not to. Try to drink water or diluted fruit juice and avoid tea, coffee or alcohol.
- Always carry a water bottle to avoid becoming dehydrated.
- Eat smaller meals more often. Cold meals, such as salads and fruit, help keep your water levels up and as you are not using your stove or oven your home will be cooler.
- Take care when you buy, store and handle food in hot weather to reduce the risk of food poisoning.

## Signs and symptoms of heat stress

- muscle cramps
- pale skin
- dizziness
- headache
- nausea (feeling sick)
- increased heart rate
- fainting
- excessive sweating or no sweating with high temperature and hot, dry skin
- urinating less often and darker urine
- confusion.

## Treatment of heat stress

If you think you may be suffering from heat stress, you need to be cool yourself down immediately.

Use whatever means is on hand, for example, sponge and fan yourself, get into a cool shower or wet with a garden hose. Seek immediate medical help.

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

## Advice for carers

This advice is just as important if you care for an older family member, friend or neighbour.

Remember that as a carer, if you don't take care of yourself in hot weather you are putting your own health at risk as well as those you care for.

## Where to get help

- If you have severe symptoms, always dial triple zero (000) to call an ambulance in a medical emergency.
- See your doctor.
- Visit a GP after hours.
- Ring *healthdirect Australia* on 1800 022 222.
- **Remember**
- When it is very hot, you may be at increased risk of heat stress.

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This fact sheet has been prepared using information from the sources listed here

[http://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Healthy-WA/Articles/F\\_I/Heat-stress-in-older-people\\_20141126](http://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Healthy-WA/Articles/F_I/Heat-stress-in-older-people_20141126)

[http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcv2/bhcv2pdf.nsf/ByPDF/Heat\\_stress\\_and\\_the\\_elderly/\\$File/Heat\\_stress\\_and\\_the\\_elderly.pdf\\_20141126](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcv2/bhcv2pdf.nsf/ByPDF/Heat_stress_and_the_elderly/$File/Heat_stress_and_the_elderly.pdf_20141126)