

Frequently Asked Questions about extreme heat and public health

Q: Who is at greatest risk for heat-related illness?

A: Those at greatest risk for heat-related illness include infants and children up to four years of age, people 65 years of age and older, people who are overweight, and people who are ill or on certain medications.

Q: How can people protect their health when temperatures are extremely high?

A: Remember to keep cool and use common sense. Drink plenty of fluids, wear light colored clothing and sunscreen, schedule outdoor activities during cooler times of the day—like in the morning or evening.

Q: How much should I drink during hot weather?

A: During hot weather you will need to drink more liquid than your thirst indicates. Increase your fluid intake, regardless of your activity level. During heavy exercise in a hot environment, drink two to four glasses (16-32 ounces) of cool fluids each hour. Avoid drinks containing alcohol because they will actually cause you to lose more fluid.

Q: What is heat stroke?

A: Heat stroke is the most serious heat-related illness. It occurs when the body becomes unable to control its temperature: the body's temperature rises rapidly, the sweating mechanism fails, and the body is unable to cool down. Heat stroke can cause death or permanent disability if emergency treatment is not provided.

Q: What are the warning signs of a heat stroke?

A:

- An extremely high body temperature (above 103°F)
- Red, hot, and dry skin (no sweating)
- Rapid, strong pulse
- Throbbing headache
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Confusion
- Unconsciousness

Q: What should I do if I see someone with any of the warning signs of heat stroke?

A: If you see any of these signs, you may be dealing with a life-threatening emergency. Have someone call for immediate medical assistance while you begin cooling the victim.

Do the following:

- Get the person to a shady area.
- Cool the person rapidly, using whatever methods you can: immerse the person in a tub of cool water or a cool shower; or spray the person with cool water from a garden hose.
- Monitor body temperature and continue cooling efforts until the body temperature drops to 101-102°F.
- If emergency medical personnel are delayed, call the hospital emergency room for further instructions.
- Do not give the victim alcohol to drink.

Q: What is heat exhaustion?

A: Heat exhaustion is a milder form of heat-related illness that can develop after several days of exposure to high temperatures and inadequate or unbalanced replacement of fluids. Those most prone to heat exhaustion are elderly people, those with high blood pressure, and those working or exercising in a hot environment.

Q: What are the warning signs of heat exhaustion?

A: The warning signs of heat exhaustion include the following:

Heavy sweating	Paleness
Muscle cramps	Tiredness
Weakness	Dizziness
Headache	Nausea or vomiting

If heat exhaustion is untreated, it may progress to heat stroke. See medical attention if symptoms worsen or last longer than one hour.

Q: What steps can be taken to cool the body during heat exhaustion?

A:

- Drink cool, nonalcoholic beverages.
- Rest.
- Take a cool shower, bath, or sponge bath.
- Seek an air-conditioned environment.

Q: What happens to the body as a result of exposure to extreme heat?

A: People suffer heat-related illness when the body's temperature control system is overloaded. The body normally cools itself by sweating. But under some conditions, sweating just isn't enough. In such cases, a person's body temperature rises rapidly. Very high body temperatures may damage the brain or other vital organs.

Q: Can medications increase the risk of heat-related illness?

A: The risk for heat-related illness and death may increase among people using the following drugs:

1. Psychotropics, which affect psychic function, behavior, or experience (e.g. haloperidol or chlorpromazine)
2. Medications for Parkinson's disease, because they can inhibit perspiration
3. Tranquilizers such as phenothiazines, butyrophenones, and thiozanthenes
4. Diuretic medications or "water pills" that affect fluid balance in the body

Q. What should I do if I work in a hot environment?

A. Pace yourself. If you are not accustomed to working or exercising in a hot environment, start slowly and pick up the pace gradually. If exertion in the heat makes your heart pound and leaves you gasping for breath, STOP all activity. Get into a cool area or at least in the shade, and rest, especially if you become lightheaded, confused, weak, or faint.

Q. How effective are electric fans in preventing heat-related illness?

A. Electric fans may provide comfort, but when the temperature is in the high 90s or above, fans will not prevent heat-related illness. Taking a cool shower or bath or moving to an air-conditioned place is a much better way to cool off. Air conditioning is the strongest protective factor against heat-related illness. Exposure to air conditioning for even a few hours a day will reduce the risk for heat-related illness.

Q. What are heat cramps and who is affected?

A. Heat cramps are muscle pains or spasms – usually in the abdomen, arms, or legs – that may occur in association with strenuous activity. People who sweat a lot during strenuous activity are prone to heat cramps. This sweating depletes the body's salt and moisture. The low salt level in the muscles causes painful cramps. Heat cramps may also be a symptom of heat exhaustion. If you have heart problems or are on a low-sodium diet, seek medical attention for heat cramps.

Q. What should I do if I have heat cramps?

A. If medical attention is not necessary, take the following steps:

- Stop all activity and sit quietly in a cool place.
- Drink clear juice or a sports beverage.
- Do not return to strenuous activity for a few hours after the cramps subside because further exertion may lead to heat exhaustion or heat stroke.
- Seek medical attention for heat cramps if they do not subside in 1 hour.

Q. What is heat rash?

A. Heat rash is a skin irritation caused by excessive sweating during hot, humid weather. It can occur at any age but is most common in young children. Heat rash looks like a red cluster of pimples or small blisters. It is more likely to occur on the neck and upper chest, in the groin, under the breasts, and in elbow creases.

Q. What is the best treatment for heat rash?

A. The best treatment for heat rash is to provide a cooler, less humid environment. Keep the affected area dry.

Q. What factors can affect the way the body regulates heat?

A. Several factors affect the body's ability to cool itself during extremely hot weather. When the humidity is high, sweat will not evaporate as quickly, preventing the body from releasing heat quickly. Other conditions that can limit the ability to regulate temperature include old age, youth (age 0-4), obesity, fever, dehydration, heart disease, mental illness, poor circulation, sunburn, and prescription drug use and alcohol use.

Q. Should I take salt tablets during hot weather?

A. Do not take salt tablets during hot weather unless directed by your healthcare provider.

Q. What is the best clothing for hot weather or a heat wave?

A. Wear lightweight, light-colored, loose-fitting clothing. A wide-brimmed hat will provide shade and keep the head cool. When outdoors, be sure to apply sunscreen 30 minutes prior to going out and continue to reapply according to the package directions. Sunburn affects your body's ability to cool itself and causes a loss of body fluids.