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- Heat stress and older people

## Heat stress and older people

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## Summary

- 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.

## Symptoms of heat stress

The symptoms depend on the heat-related illness, but may include:

- hot and dry skin
- paleness
- rapid heart rate
- muscle cramps
- nausea and vomiting
- disorientation and confusion
- delirium
- fainting or coma
- worsening of pre-existing medical conditions.

## 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.
- **Chronic medical problems** – older people are more likely to have chronic medical problems. Certain conditions make the body more vulnerable to heat stress.
- **Medications** – older people with chronic medical problems usually take medications on a regular basis. Some medications can hinder the body's ability to regulate temperature.
- **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.

## Medications and hot weather

Some medications increase the risk of heat stress. How this works varies according to the medication, for example:

- Antidepressants, antihistamines, phenothiazines and anticholinergics (used for some psychiatric conditions) act on an area of the brain that controls the skin's ability to make sweat.
- Beta blockers (heart tablets) reduce the ability of the heart and lungs to adapt to stresses including hot weather.
- Amphetamines raise body temperature.
- Diuretics (fluid tablets) act on the kidneys and encourage fluid loss. This can quickly lead to dehydration in hot weather.
- Opioids and sedatives can reduce the person's awareness of physical discomfort, which means symptoms of heat stress may be ignored.

**Please note** that this list is only a sample. Discuss your medications with your doctor or pharmacist.

## 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.

## How to help an elderly relative or friend

There are many ways that you can help your elderly relative or friend avoid heat stress. Suggestions include:

- Ask for a copy of their patient information. This information should include emergency contact information, medication list and medical conditions, and telephone numbers of doctors or specialists. This information will allow you to offer speedy help in a crisis.
- Check on them frequently to make sure they are all right. Look for signs of heat stress such as hot and dry skin, dizziness, headache and cramps. People at high risk of heat stress – such as those who live alone, are frail, bedridden or mentally ill, should be checked at least twice a day.
- If they don't have air conditioning at home, take them to an air-conditioned place such as a shopping centre or library for a respite.
- Make sure their home has adequate ventilation. Electric fans cause air movement that helps evaporate sweat from the skin and the body to cool.

## First aid for heat stress

If your elderly relative or friend seems to be suffering from heat stress, cool them down promptly. Use whatever means is on hand, for example, sponge and fan the person, get them into a cool shower or wet them with a garden hose. Seek immediate medical help.

## Where to get help

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

## Things to remember

- 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 drugs.
- Take steps to prevent heat stress on days when the temperature is predicted to rise above 30°C or so.

### References

- *Extreme heat and heatwaves*, 2015, Environmental Health Unit, Department of Health & Human Services, Victorian Government. [More information here.](#)
- *Overview of heat illness*, 2014, Merck Manual Professional Edition. [More information here.](#)
- *Heat stress in older adults*, 2012, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention USA. [More information here.](#)

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Please note that we cannot answer personal medical queries.

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- talk to your doctor or pharmacist
- dial triple zero (000) in an emergency

- ring NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24.

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### Safety basics

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- [Animals and child safety](#)

[Children should always be closely supervised near animals and taught how to behave safely around pets...](#)

- [Babies and safety](#)

[Most injuries to babies do not occur by chance - many are predictable and largely preventable...](#)

- [Baby care - moving from cot to bed](#)

[Some children are unsettled the first few nights in a 'big bed'. Try to be patient, loving and reassuring...](#)

- [Baby furniture - safety tips](#)

[Even if your baby furniture meets every safety standard and recommendation, your child still needs close supervision...](#)

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[Most hot tap water scald injuries to children happen in the bathroom...](#)

- [Child safety and injury prevention](#)

[By making a few practical changes to your home, you can dramatically reduce the risk of injury to your child...](#)

- [Child safety in the car](#)

[Taking care to restrain children correctly while travelling in a car is the best way to prevent injuries...](#)

- [Eating tips for young toddlers](#)

[Children have a natural ability to sense when they are hungry and when they are full...](#)

- [Farm safety – children](#)

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[Teach your child strategies for responding to mobile phone bullying...](#)

- [Playgrounds and child safety](#)

[Play environments can be safe and beneficial for your child. With proper planning, you can make sure your child gets plenty of playtime activity...](#)

- [Poisoning and child safety](#)

[Call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 immediately if you suspect your child has been poisoned or given the wrong medicine or the wrong dose of medicine...](#)

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- [Water safety for children](#)

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[Asbestos fibres breathed into the lungs can cause a range of health problems including lung cancer and mesothelioma...](#)

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[Learn how to safely store and dispose of household chemicals, and how to respond when a person is poisoned...](#)

- [Electric shock](#)

[Always disconnect the power supply before trying to help a victim of electric shock...](#)

- [Gas heating - health and safety issues](#)

[If you service your gas heater regularly and use it correctly, it will be safe and economical to use...](#)

- [Greywater - recycling water at home](#)

[When handled properly, greywater can be safely reused for the garden...](#)

- [Groundwater](#)

[Groundwater quality varies across Victoria; in some areas, groundwater is not suitable for use...](#)

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[Stop and think before you use a ladder...](#)

- [Ladder safety matters – Nick \(video\)](#)

[Stop and think before you use a ladder...](#)

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[Injuries associated with ladder falls have been steadily increasing in Australia, especially among men aged 60 years and older doing work in and around the home...](#)

- [Ladder Safety – Paul's story](#)

[Paul was sanding the exterior of his house when he overreached and fell more than two metres from his ladder...](#)

- [Ladders Safety Matters - Paul \(video\)](#)

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- [Pest control in the home](#)

[If you use pesticides to control pests around the house, make sure you use as little as possible...](#)

- [Swimming pools - water quality](#)

[Check your swimming pool regularly to make sure the water is safe for swimming...](#)

- [Vision loss - safety around the home](#)

[There are many ways to improve home safety for people whose vision is deteriorating...](#)

- [Water quality in tanks, bores and dams](#)

[Make sure your private drinking water supply is safe...](#)

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[Teach your child strategies for responding to mobile phone bullying...](#)

- [Partying safely – tips for teenagers](#)

[Don't advertise a party via SMS or the internet to limit the risk of gate-crashers and violent situations...](#)

- [Solariums \(sunbeds and tanning beds\)](#)

[There is no such thing as a safe solarium tan...](#)

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[Training too hard or fast is a common cause of sports-related injuries...](#)

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[The early responses to hypothermia will be moving around, seeking shelter, hair standing on end \(goosebumps\) and shivering...](#)

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[Choose a route that is appropriate for your age and fitness level. Warm up and cool down with a slow, gentle pace to ease in and out of your exercise session...](#)

- [Water from natural resources](#)

[Drinking untreated water, such as creek water, bore water and sometimes even rainwater can lead to illnesses including gastroenteritis...](#)

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[You can reduce your risk of being mugged or robbed while travelling by taking a few simple precautions...](#)

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- [After a flood – returning home safely](#)

[When returning to your home after a flood, take precautions to reduce the possibility of injury, illness or disease...](#)

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[Houses, sheds and other buildings or structures burnt in a bushfire can leave potential health hazards...](#)

- [Bushfire preparation advice](#)

[Being prepared for a bushfire helps you cope better in an emergency...](#)

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[Bushfire smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas, and may affect people's health...](#)

- [Emergencies - floods](#)

[You and your family should work out an emergency plan in case of flood...](#)

- [Smoke from planned burns](#)

[Bushfire smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas, and may affect people's health. Planned burns are an important part of reducing the risk of bushfires...](#)

- [Talking to children about bushfire risk](#)

[Children can be affected by information regarding bushfire risk and they may become concerned about issues of safety. Talking to children openly in a way that suits their age, while also involving...](#)

- [Urban flash floods - FAQs](#)

[Urban flash flooding can happen quickly and without warning. Heavy rain causes runoff to collect in dips, car parks and roads, and there is a risk of contamination, injury and disease...](#)

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- [Farm safety and handling agrichemicals](#)

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[Children who live on farms are at greater risk of injury and death than their parents or other farm workers...](#)

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[Falls are a common farm hazard, especially for older farmers...](#)

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[Any animal-handling practices can increase the risk of injury to farmers, farm workers and the animal...](#)

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