

Heat-related health problems

OFFICIAL

Summary

- Heat kills more Australians than any other natural disaster.
- Heat can cause serious and potentially fatal health problems such as heat exhaustion and heatstroke, trigger sudden events like a heart attack or stroke, or worsen existing medical conditions like kidney or lung disease and mental illness.
- Extreme heat can affect anybody. However, those most at-risk include people over 65 years, babies and young children, pregnant women, people with acute or chronic medical conditions, those who are socially isolated or have limited ways to keep cool.
- Call Triple Zero (000) in a medical emergency like heatstroke or other serious medical condition.
- Take steps to protect yourself and others by staying cool, staying hydrated, planning ahead and checking in with others.

Heat-related health problems

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Heat can cause serious and potentially fatal health problems such as heat exhaustion and heatstroke, trigger sudden events like heart attack or stroke, or worsen existing medical conditions like kidney or lung disease and mental illness.

People more at-risk of heat-related health problems

Extreme heat can affect anybody. Those more at-risk of heat-related health problems include:

- People over the age of 65
- Babies and young children
- [Pregnant women](#)
- People with existing medical conditions, such as [heart disease](#), [kidney disease](#), [diabetes](#), or [mental illness](#)
- People on certain medications including diuretics (fluid tablets) and drugs with anticholinergic properties
- People who work or exercise outdoors
- People who are socially isolated or living alone
- People with limited ways to keep cool or living in buildings that heat up easily
- People who are experiencing homelessness.

Causes of heat-related health problems

Heat-related health problems occur when our bodies overheat or become dehydrated through sweating or both.

Protective actions such as staying cool and drinking enough water can reduce the risk of heat-related health problems.

Refer to the [How to stay safe in extreme heat](#) page for more information.

Symptoms and first aid for heat-related health problems

It is important to know the signs and symptoms of heat-related health problems and how to respond.

Apply [first aid](#) and seek medical assistance immediately if someone shows signs of heat exhaustion, heatstroke or another [health emergency](#).

Dehydration

Dehydration occurs when the body doesn't have enough fluid to carry out its normal functions.

Signs and symptoms include:

- thirst
- dry mouth
- dizziness or headache
- lethargy or tiredness
- difficulty thinking clearly
- passing less urine than usual
- having dark or strong-smelling urine.

First aid for dehydration due to heat includes:

- Move to a cool area and rest.
- Remove clothing and wet the skin with cool water.
- Drink plenty of water.

If symptoms do not improve, the person can see their GP or call Nurse-On-Call on [1300 60 60 24](#) for 24-hour health advice or contact the [Victorian Virtual Emergency Department](#).

Heat cramps

Heat [cramps](#) occur when the body loses salt and water due to excessive sweating and physical activity. Heat cramps may also be a symptom of heat exhaustion.

Symptoms include muscle pains or spasms, usually in the abdomen, arms or legs.

First aid for heat cramps includes:

- Stop any activity.
- Rest in a cool or shaded area with legs supported or slightly elevated.
- Drink cool water.
- Rest a few hours before returning to activity.

If symptoms do not improve, seek medical care. See your GP or call [Nurse-on-Call](#) on [1300 60 60 24](#) for 24-hour health advice.

Heat exhaustion

Heat exhaustion occurs when the body overheats and becomes dehydrated, usually from excessive sweating or physical activity. It is a serious condition that can progress to heatstroke.

Signs and symptoms of heat exhaustion include:

- feeling thirsty or irritable
- weakness or feeling faint
- dizziness, headache
- nausea and vomiting
- muscle cramps
- heavy sweating
- pale complexion
- passing less urine than usual.

First aid for heat exhaustion includes:

- Lie down and rest in a cool area with legs supported and slightly elevated.
- Remove excess clothing or loosen tight clothing.
- Cool the person down using a cool water spray; applying a cool, damp sponge or cloth; and applying an ice pack or crushed ice in a damp towel on the neck, groin or armpits. Fan the person if possible. If they are able, have the person take a cool shower or bath.
- Encourage frequent sips of cool water if not vomiting.

If symptoms do not improve, seek medical care. See the GP, contact the [Victorian Virtual Emergency Department](#) or visit the emergency department.

If symptoms worsen or you are concerned about heatstroke, **call Triple Zero (000)**.

Heatstroke

Heatstroke is a serious and potentially fatal health problem that occurs when the body overheats to dangerous levels and impairs organ function.

People can progress from heat exhaustion to heatstroke, which can result in permanent disability or death.

Heatstroke means the functioning of the person's brain is being affected. Look for any signs of:

- confusion or agitation
- incoherent speech
- abnormal walking
- seizures or impaired or loss consciousness.

Signs and symptoms of heatstroke also include:

- dizziness
- nausea and vomiting
- headache
- intense thirst
- sleepiness
- very high body temperature
- red, hot, dry skin
- dry tongue
- rapid breathing

- muscle twitching.

Heatstroke is a medical emergency and requires urgent attention:

- **Call Triple Zero (000) immediately for an ambulance.**
- Get the person to lie down in a cool area. Have someone stay with the person.
- Remove excess clothing or loosen tight clothing.
- Cool the person using a cool water spray; applying a cool, damp sponge or cloth; and applying an ice pack or crushed ice in a damp towel on the neck, groin or armpits. Fan the person if possible.
- Give the person cool water to drink if they are fully conscious and able to swallow.
- If unconscious, position the person on their left side in the [recovery position](#) and ensure they are breathing normally. If needed, perform [CPR](#). Wait for the ambulance to urgently transport the person to hospital.

Heat rash

Heat rash, also known as prickly heat, is an itchy skin irritation that is most common in babies and young children.

Heat rash is most likely to occur on the neck, upper chest, waistline, in the groin, under the breasts, and in skin folds and armpits.

The symptoms of heat rash include redness, mild swelling, and a cluster of small red spots in the affected area, associated with itch and prickling sensation.

Symptoms of heat rash can last for several days.

Heat rash normally goes away without treatment. To prevent heat rash and help it resolve faster you can:

- Move to a cooler and well ventilated, less humid environment to cool down and stop sweating.
- Keep the affected area dry.
- Wear loose cotton clothing to help prevent overheating and avoid scratchy fabrics which irritate the skin.

If symptoms do not improve seek further medical care. See the GP, call [Nurse-on-Call](#) on [1300 60 60 24](#) for 24-hour health advice or a pharmacist.

Deterioration in existing medical conditions

Extreme heat can worsen existing health problems. Conditions that may be triggered or worsened by heat include:

- [Heart attack](#)
- [Stroke](#)
- [Kidney problems](#)
- [Asthma](#) and other [respiratory illnesses](#) (especially in the presence of air pollution or [smoke](#))
- Worsening of mental illness.

Where to get help

- **In an emergency, call triple zero (000)**
- The [Translating and Interpreting Service \(TIS National\)](#) is available (24 hours, 7 days) for callers who speak other languages. Call [131 450](#).
- Your [GP \(doctor\)](#) – if you, or someone you know, may be suffering from a heat-related illness
- [Nurse-on-Call](#) Tel. [1300 60 60 24](#) – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)

- Contact the [Victorian Virtual Emergency Department](#) for non-life-threatening emergencies
- [Maternal and Child Health Line](#), Victoria Tel. [132 229](#) (24 hours, 7 days)
- [St John Ambulance Australia](#) – for information and resources on first aid
- [Health Translations Directory](#) – extreme heat information in community languages.