Heat stress and older people

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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


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Please note that we cannot answer personal medical queries. If you are looking for health or medical advice we recommend that you:

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

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More information

Safety

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Safety basics
- Child safety
- Safety in and around the home
- Safe lifestyle and entertainment
- Outdoor, weather and sports safety
- Travel and transport safety
- Fire, flood and other disasters
- Work and environmental safety
- Farm safety

Safety basics

- Bites and stings – first aid
  
  If you are bitten or stung by an insect or animal, apply first aid and seek medical treatment as soon as possible...

- How to survive a rip current (video)
  
  Learn what to do if you find yourself in a rip current...

- Ladder safety matters – Mick (video)
Stop and think before you use a ladder...
Ladder safety matters – Nick (video)
Stop and think before you use a ladder...
Ladders Safety Matters - Paul (video)
We can keep our pools safe, healthy, and most importantly fun...
Look after your health at harvest time
Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness.

Child safety

- 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.
- Bicycle safety and children
  As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety and become safer road and bicycle users.
- Burns and scalds - children
  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
  Children who live on farms are at greater risk of injury and death than their parents or other farm workers.
- Hot weather and child safety
  Babies and children can quickly lose body fluids in hot weather, which can lead to dehydration.
- Internet safety for children
  A child's digital footprint can be as easy to follow as their real footprints.
- Look after your health at harvest time
  Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness.
- Mobile phone safety for children
  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...
Road and traffic safety for children
As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety, and become safer road users.

Scooters and child safety
Scooters can travel at fast speeds and falls and collisions are disturbingly common.

Water safety for children
Toddlers are most at risk of drowning because they are mobile and curious but don't understand the danger of water.

Safety in and around the home

Animals and child safety
Children should always be closely supervised near animals and taught how to behave safely around pets.

Asbestos in the home
Asbestos fibres breathed into the lungs can cause a range of health problems including lung cancer and mesothelioma.

Chemicals in the home
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.

Ladder safety matters – Mick (video)
Stop and think before you use a ladder.

Ladder safety matters – Nick (video)
Stop and think before you use a ladder.

Ladder Safety – Mick's story
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 – Nick's story
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)
We can keep our pools safe, healthy, and most importantly fun.

Look after your health at harvest time
Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness.

Medicines - safety issues
Make sure your doctor knows about every medicine you take, including vitamins.

Older people – preventing falls at home
Falls are a major cause of injury for older people. Find out how you can prevent falls around your home.

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...

- **Water safety for children**
  Toddlers are most at risk of drowning because they are mobile and curious but don't understand the danger of water...

**Safe lifestyle and entertainment**

- **Internet safety for children**
  A child's digital footprint can be as easy to follow as their real footprints...

- **Mobile phone safety for children**
  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...

**Outdoor, weather and sports safety**

- **Exercise safety**
  Training too hard or fast is a common cause of sports-related injuries...

- **Heat stress and heat-related illness**
  Heat kills more Australians than any natural disaster. Find out how you can treat and prevent heat-related illness...

- **Heat stress and older people**
  People aged 65 years and over are at increased risk of heat-related illnesses and need special care in hot weather...

- **Heat stress -- preventing heatstroke**
  Heatstroke is a life-threatening emergency that can be avoided by following simple prevention measures...

- **Hot weather and child safety**
  Babies and children can quickly lose body fluids in hot weather, which can lead to dehydration...

- **How to cope and stay safe in extreme heat**
  Know the effects of extreme heat, who is at risk and how you can prepare yourself and others...

- **How to survive a rip current (video)**
  Learn what to do if you find yourself in a rip current...

- **Hypothermia**
  The early responses to hypothermia will be moving around, seeking shelter, hair standing on end (goosebumps) and shivering...

- **Walking - safety and environmental issues**
  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...

- **Water safety for children**
  Toddlers are most at risk of drowning because they are mobile and curious but don't understand the danger of water...

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Travel and transport safety

- Bicycle safety and children
  As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety and become safer road and bicycle users.

- Child safety in the car
  Taking care to restrain children correctly while travelling in a car is the best way to prevent injuries.

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- Motor vehicle crashes
  Motor vehicle crashes continue to be one of the biggest killers and causes of injury in Victoria.

- Road and traffic safety for children
  As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety, and become safer road users.

- Safe driving
  Safe driving is up to every individual on the road. You can be a safe driver by being alert and ready to take action at any time.

- Scooters and child safety
  Scooters can travel at fast speeds and falls and collisions are disturbingly common.

- Travel safety tips
  You can reduce your risk of being mugged or robbed while travelling by taking a few simple precautions.

Fire, flood and other disasters

- After a flood – animal and insect related hazards
  When returning to a flood-affected area, remember that wild animals, including rats, mice, snakes or spiders, may be trapped in your home, shed or garden.

- 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.

- Bushfire aftermath - safety tips
  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.

- Bushfire smoke
  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.

Work and environmental safety

- Asbestos and your health
When asbestos fibres become airborne, people working with asbestos may inhale particles which remain in their lungs.

- **Cadmium**
  low-level exposure to cadmium over a long period of time may cause health effects because cadmium can accumulate in the body.

- **Computer-related injuries**
  using a computer can contribute to problems of the muscles and joints, eyestrain and overuse injuries of the arms, wrists and hands.

- **Eye safety at work**
  wearing eye protection appropriate for the task can significantly reduce the risk of injury.

- **Ladder safety matters – Mick (video)**
  stop and think before you use a ladder.

- **Ladder safety matters – Nick (video)**
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- **Q fever**
  Q fever is caused by a micro-organism that can be carried by cattle, sheep and goats.

- **Shiftwork**
  a person working the night shift is at greater risk of various disorders and accidents.

- **Skin cancer – protecting outdoor workers**
  people who work outdoors are in one of the highest risk groups for skin cancer.

- **Workplace conflict**
  a clash of personalities at work is bad for business, because it can affect productivity and increase absenteeism.

- **Workplace safety – confined spaces**
  around 60 per cent of people killed in confined spaces were trying to rescue someone else.

- **Workplace safety – dangerous goods**
  dangerous goods are objects or substances that are potentially harmful to people or the environment, such as explosives or chemicals.

- **Workplace safety – hazardous substances**
  a hazardous substance can be inhaled, splashed onto the skin or eyes, or swallowed.

- **Workplace safety – infection control**
  the spread of many pathogens in the workplace can be prevented with regular hand washing.

- **Workplace safety – manual handling injuries**
  a person can be injured when handling objects in a variety of ways including pulling, pushing, holding or restraining.

- **Workplace safety – noise pollution**
  there are many ways to reduce exposure to excessive noise in the workplace.

- **Workplace safety – overuse injuries**
  occupational overuse syndrome, also known as RSI, is caused by repetitive movements or awkward postures.

- **Work-related fatalities**
  in 2013, 196 people lost their lives due to work-related accidents in Australia. Find out more about your industry and which organisations help to prevent work-related deaths in your workplace.

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Heat stress and older people

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• Chemicals and spray drift
  Sprayed chemicals can drift over neighbouring properties or water sources, and can affect human health, animals or the environment...

• Farm safety and handling agrochemicals
  To reduce risks on the farm, use hazardous chemicals according to manufacturer guidelines or replace them with less dangerous options...

• Farm safety – children
  Children who live on farms are at greater risk of injury and death than their parents or other farm workers...

• Farm safety - confined spaces
  Any confined space on a farm can be dangerous and the threat may not be apparent until it's too late...

• Farm safety - crush injuries
  Hand and finger injuries are the most common crush injuries that occur on Victorian farms...

• Farm safety - falls
  Falls are a common farm hazard, especially for older farmers...

• Farm safety - handling animals
  Any animal-handling practices can increase the risk of injury to farmers, farm workers and the animal...

• Farm safety - machinery
  Poorly used or faulty machinery is a major cause of death and injury on farms...

• Farm safety - manual handling
  Farm workers often experience muscle and ligament strain, but good manual handling techniques and safe work habits can prevent most injuries...

• Farm safety - quad bikes
  Most injuries and deaths involving quad bikes (all-terrain vehicles) are caused by the bike rolling over the rider...

• Farm safety - risks and hazards
  Farms can be dangerous places for workers and family members, but the risks can be reduced...

• Farm safety – sheep and shearing
  Handling sheep can cause manual injuries and badly designed shearing sheds can present a range of hazards...

• Look after your health at harvest time
  Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness...

Related Information

• Heat stress and heat-related illness
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• Hypothermia
  The early responses to hypothermia will be moving around, seeking shelter, hair standing on end (goosebumps) and shivering...

Home

Related information on other websites

• Heatwave - important health information for summer
• US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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Well for life - A healthy approach to ageing

The Department of Health and Human Services - Well for life - A healthy approach to ageing booklet (pdf)

NURSE-ON-CALL

Provides immediate, expert health advice from a registered nurse. Call 1300 60 60 24

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Multilingual resources on heat and hydration

- Beat the heat, health tips for a safe season
- Beat the heat, how to keep someone healthy during hot weather
- Extreme heat - what to do to survive the heat
- Heat-related illness including heat stroke
- Survive the heat brochure
- Survive the heat poster
- Choose water as a drink
- Stay healthy, stay hydrated (poster)
- The importance of drinking water
- Water - the drink for children

Health topics

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