

Avoiding Heat-Related Stress

What is heat-related stress?

Heat-related stress is illness which usually occurs when a person is exposed to a hot environment which overwhelms their body's ability to maintain a normal temperature.

The early symptoms of heat-related stress include headaches, dizziness, faintness, nausea and vomiting. In babies, signs of heat-related stress include restlessness, irritability and a reduced number of wet nappies.

Heat-related stress is a serious medical condition. If not spotted early and managed properly, people can potentially develop life-threatening illness (heat-stroke). Simple measures can be applied to significantly reduce the chance of heat-related stress.

What causes heat-related stress?

People adapt to heat by sweating, reducing their level of physical activity and moving to a cool environment such as an air-conditioned building. If a person is not able to adapt in this way then their body temperature begins to rise and they become unwell. Heat-related stress can occur in anyone, but those most at risk include:

- young children and babies;
- the elderly;
- pregnant women;
- obese individuals;
- disabled individuals, particularly those with impaired mobility;
- individuals on medications which promote fluid loss or reduce sweating;
- individuals who exercise or work outdoors; and
- people who are not acclimatised to heat (e.g. overseas visitors).

Heat-related stress can occur on normal summer days, but the risk of developing heat-related stress increases dramatically if the mean temperature meets or exceeds 28 °C. The mean temperature is measured by the maximum temperature from one day and the subsequent night's minimum temperature (e.g. maximum of 38 °C and minimum of 20 °C divided by two equals a mean temperature of 29 °C).

The risk of developing heat-related stress is highest during a 'heat-wave' when the mean temperatures meet or exceed 28 °C for several sequential days. Relatively short exposure to extremely hot environments can also cause heat-related stress (e.g. the interior of a hot car, a tent on a hot day, or periods of direct sun exposure).

How can heat-related stress be prevented?

Individuals must protect themselves from the dangers of heat-related stress during hot summer days and heat-waves. The following measures should be followed to reduce the chance of suffering heat-related stress:

Drink plenty of fluids and avoid dehydration

- Dehydration reduces your body's ability to cool itself by sweating. Check with your doctor how much you should drink if you are on limited fluids or fluid pills.
- Water is the best fluid to drink.
- Avoid beverages which contain caffeine or alcohol.

Stay in a cool environment

- Stay indoors or in the shade wherever possible.
- Sleep in the coolest part of the house.
- Keep air circulating and use air conditioning if available. If you don't have air conditioning, consider visiting an air-conditioned facility such as:
 - Cinemas;
 - Community centres;
 - Libraries;
 - Public galleries; and
 - Shopping centres.

Reduce physical activity

- Avoid strenuous physical activity.
- If activity is unavoidable, rest often and drink plenty of fluids.

Take extra measures to increase cooling

- Wear light-weight clothing.
- Take a shower, bath or sponge bath.
- Eat regular, light meals.

Look out for your neighbours, family and friends

- Frequently check on older, sick and frail people and neighbours who may need help coping with the heat.
- Never leave children or pets unattended in a motor vehicle as temperatures can rise very rapidly to dangerous levels.

If a person becomes unresponsive, confused or disoriented in the heat they should receive urgent medical attention.

For more information visit the ACT Health website: www.health.act.gov.au

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www.health.act.gov.au | Phone: 132281 | Publication No XXXXX

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