

Avoiding Heat-Related Stress – Information for Aged Care

The elderly are particularly vulnerable to heat-related stress because of physical changes which occur naturally with aging as well as having a higher rate of chronic illness and disability. Residents and people working in aged care facilities should be aware of the potential for heat-related stress during summer.

Why are older people vulnerable?

- People aged over 65 years experience a gradual decline in their ability to adapt to increased temperatures.
- Elderly people have a decreased ability to sweat and to reduce any excess body heat.
- The elderly may be taking medications which can further impair their ability to sweat in hot environments. These include diuretics (fluid-pills), beta-blockers, some antipsychotic medications, and tricyclic antidepressants.
- Elderly people with mobility issues may be at greater risk of suffering heat-related stress. This may be due to individuals limiting their water intake in situations where toilet facilities may not be readily accessible, difficulty accessing water, or difficulty moving to cooler areas of a facility.
- Elderly people with cognitive impairment or difficulties with communication may not be able to express their need for water or their desire to move to a cooler area.
- Some elderly people may not have easy access to equipment such as fans, air-conditioners or showers which are useful for cooling on hot days.

How can heat-related stress be prevented?

Residents of aged care facilities should be requested to take the following measures to reduce their risk of 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 building.
- Keep air circulating and use air conditioning if available. If you don't have air-conditioning, consider visiting an air-conditioned shopping centre or library.

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 and light-coloured clothing.
- Take a cool shower, bath or sponge bath.
- Eat regular, light meals.

Managers of Aged Care Facilities

Managers of aged care facilities that have frail or cognitively impaired residents should take the following measures to reduce the risk of heat-related stress:

- Frequently check residents for signs of heat-related stress.
- Ensure that frail or cognitively impaired residents are moved out of environments that become hot to areas that are cooler and/or well ventilated.
- Ensure residents have ready access to water, keeping in mind any limitations in physical mobility.
- Pay close attention to food preparation and handling during summer to avoid dehydration, which occurs as a result of gastroenteritis and can exacerbate heat-related stress in the elderly and have severe health consequences.
- Have a contingency plan to manage an unexpected prolonged disruption to air-conditioning, fridges and freezers in the event of a power outage.

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

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