



## FACT SHEET

# Caring for Your Vulnerable Patients During a Heat Wave

Talking to patients during routine visits about how they can prevent heat-related illness can go a long way toward avoiding such illnesses. Simple steps can make a big difference, particularly for high-risk patients. These steps include encouraging patients to:

- Stay cool.
- Stay hydrated.
- Stay informed.

### Here are some simple steps you can take to help your high-risk patients:

- Help patients identify cool air-conditioned public places they can go to when their home gets too hot.
- Tell patients that fans should not be relied on to keep them cool once the temperatures are above 90°F.
- Make sure patients know they should drink water before they become thirsty. Provide extra guidance if their medications or condition will affect how they stay hydrated.
- Inform patients about proper medication storage, particularly for medications sensitive to temperature variations.
- Tell them about the warning signs of heat stroke, heat exhaustion or complications of chronic illness that might be triggered by extreme heat. This helps patients to recognize when they are in trouble and get help if they need it.
- Tell patients to ask someone to check on them. Encourage them to tell the person about their health needs.

While heat-related illness can strike anyone under the wrong circumstances, certain people are at higher risk. The following are more likely to become ill in extreme heat events: young children; adults 65 and older; athletes; and people with a chronic illness or who are overweight, work outdoors or have low incomes.

### Conditions that put people at increased risk during heat waves

<b>Chronic illness</b>	Heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer or kidney disease, alcohol and other substance use, mental illness
<b>Conditions that impair sweating</b>	Heart disease, dehydration, extremes of age, skin disorders (including sunburn, prickly heat and excessive scarring and burns), congenital impairment of sweating, cystic fibrosis, Parkinson's disease, quadriplegia, scleroderma, people taking medications with anti-cholinergic effects. Acute illness.
<b>Impaired activities of daily living</b>	Poor mobility, cognitive impairment
<b>Social factors</b>	Living alone or socially isolated, low socioeconomic status, homelessness
<b>Occupation/recreation</b>	Exercising vigorously in the heat or working in a hot recreation environment

Source: Victoria Australia State Government, 2010

## Medications and heat waves

Some medications can increase the risk of heat-related illness or may be less effective or more toxic when exposed to high temperatures. Care planning for vulnerable patients during hot weather should include consultation with a health care provider or pharmacist about the use and storage of medications.

Mechanisms for medication increasing the risk of heat-related illness	
Reduced vasodilatation	Beta-blockers
Decreased sweating	Anticholinergics; e.g., tricyclic antidepressants and benzotropine, beta blockers, antihistamines, phenothiazines
Increased heat production	Antipsychotic drugs; e.g., risperidone, olanzapine. Stimulants; e.g., amphetamine, cocaine
Decreased thirst	Butyrophenones; e.g., haloperidol and droperidol. Angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors
Dehydration	Diuretics, alcohol
Aggravation of heat illness by worsening hypotension in vulnerable patients	Vasodilators; e.g., nitrates, calcium channel blockers, other anti-hypertensives
Increased toxicity for drugs with a narrow therapeutic index in dehydration	Digoxin, lithium, warfarin

Source: Victoria Australia State Government, 2010

## Is your practice ready for a heat wave?

- Provide a cool waiting room and close the blinds to block the sun. Create a response plan in case the power goes out.
- Be sure drinking water is available for your patients and staff. Offer extra water breaks as needed for staff.
- Follow the weather forecast and local news to anticipate heat waves. Stay aware of open cooling shelters.
- Know which patients are more vulnerable. Inform them of their particular risks, actions they need to take to protect themselves and how to locate cooling shelters.
- Make sure your staff are informed about first aid for heat-related illness.



PUBLIC HEALTH DIVISION  
Health Security, Preparedness and Response  
Phone: 971-673-1315  
Fax: 971-673-1309  
OHA website: <https://public.health.oregon.gov/Preparedness/Prepare/Pages/PrepareforExtremeHeat.aspx>  
OHA Facebook: [www.facebook.com/OregonHealthAuthority](http://www.facebook.com/OregonHealthAuthority)  
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