



## FACT SHEET

# Frequently Asked Questions about Extreme Heat and Public Health

### Q: Who is at greatest risk for heat-related illness?

**A:** Those at greatest risk for heat-related illness include young children; adults 65 and older; athletes; and people with chronic illness or who are overweight, work outdoors, or have a low income.

### Q: What things affect the way the body regulates heat?

**A:** Several things affect the body's ability to cool itself during extremely hot weather. When humidity is high, sweat won't evaporate as quickly, preventing the body from releasing heat quickly. Medications and health conditions may also affect your body's ability to regulate heat.

### Q: Are there certain health conditions that can increase my risk of heat-related illness?

**A:** Chronic illnesses such as heart or kidney disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, alcohol or substance abuse and mental illness can increase risk.

Conditions that affect a person's ability to sweat — such as heart disease, cystic fibrosis, Parkinson's disease and quadriplegia — also increase risk.

People with mobility and cognitive impairments are at increased risk of heat-related illnesses. Social factors can also contribute to risk. People who are socially isolated or have a low income may be at higher risk as well.

### Q: Can medications increase the risk of heat-related illness?

**A:** The risk for heat-related illness and death may increase among people using certain drugs. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the medications you take to learn more about their effects during periods of extreme heat, particularly if you know your medication:

- Decreases sweating
- Increases your body's ability to produce heat
- Decreases thirst
- Dehydrates the body
- Creates hypo-tension

### Q: Which chronic medical conditions put people at higher risk for heat-related illness?

**A.** People with chronic conditions that put them at higher risk for heat-related illness include those with breathing difficulties, a heart condition, high blood pressure, kidney problems, Parkinson's disease, depression, dementia or other mental illnesses.

## **Q: How can people protect their health when temperatures soar?**

**A:** Remember to stay cool, stay hydrated and stay informed. Wear light colored clothing and use sunscreen. Schedule outdoor activities during cooler times of the day — like in the morning or evening. Drink plenty of fluids. Avoid alcoholic and sugary drinks. Stay informed of the weather and watch the Heat Index to help you identify the most dangerous periods during the heat wave.

## **Q: How can I keep my home cool?**

**A:** If you have an air conditioner, make sure it is installed and working. Set air conditioners to the setting most comfortable to you, preferably between 72°F and 79°F. Block the sun by using awnings or closing curtains and blinds during the day. Avoid using a fan as your main cooling source — especially when it is 90°F or more.

## **Q: What can I do if it is too hot at home?**

**A:** Visit a place that has air conditioning, e.g., a library, community center or shopping center. Visit a cooling center if your community has one.

## **Q: How effective are electric fans in preventing heat-related illness?**

**A:** Electric fans may provide comfort, but when the temperature is in the high 90s or above, fans will not prevent heat-related illness. Taking a cool shower or bath or moving to an air-conditioned place is a much better way to cool off. Air conditioning gives strong protection against heat-related illness. Exposure to air conditioning for even a few hours a day will reduce the risk.

## **Q: How much should I drink during hot weather?**

**A:** During hot weather you will need to drink more liquid, even when you're not thirsty. Increase your fluid intake, regardless of your activity level. During heavy exercise when it's hot, drink two to four glasses (16–32 ounces) of cool fluids each hour. Avoid drinks containing alcohol or caffeine. They can cause you to lose more fluid.

## **Q: What is the best clothing for hot weather or a heat wave?**

**A:** Wear lightweight, light-colored, loose-fitting clothing. A widebrimmed hat will provide shade and keep the head cool. When outdoors, be sure to apply sunscreen 20 minutes prior to going out and continue to reapply according to the package directions. Sunburn affects your body's ability to cool itself and causes a loss of body fluids.

## **Q: What is heat stroke?**

**A:** Heat stroke is the most serious heat-related illness. It occurs when the body becomes unable to control its temperature: the body's temperature rises rapidly, sweating stops, and the body can't cool down. Heat stroke can cause death or permanent disability if emergency treatment is not provided.

## **Q: What are the warning signs of a heat stroke?**

**A:**

- Very high body temperature (104°F or more)
- Red, hot skin
- Rapid and strong pulse
- Possible unconsciousness

## Q: What should I do if I see someone with any of the warning signs of heat stroke?

**A:** If you see any of these signs, it could be a life-threatening emergency. Call 911 and then begin first aid for heat stroke.

### Do the following:

- Move the person to a cooler place, such as a shady or air-conditioned space.
- Reduce the person's body temperature by using cool cloths, a garden hose or even a cool shower.
- Do **NOT** give fluids.
- Monitor body temperature and continue cooling efforts until the body temperature drops to 101–102°F.

If emergency medical personnel are delayed, call the hospital emergency room for more instructions.

## Q: What is heat exhaustion?

**A:** Heat exhaustion is a milder illness that can develop after prolonged exposure to high temperatures. This is particularly true if fluids are not being replaced fast enough or when you are not drinking the right kinds of fluids.

## Q: What are the warning signs of heat exhaustion?

**A:** The warning signs include the following:

- Heavy sweating
- Weakness
- Fast, weak pulse
- Cold, pale and clammy skin
- Fainting
- Nausea or vomiting

**If heat exhaustion is untreated, it may progress to heat stroke. Seek medical attention if symptoms worsen or last longer than one hour.**

## Q: What steps can be taken to help treat heat exhaustion?

**A:**

- Move to a cooler location.
- Lie down and loosen your clothing.
- Apply cool, wet cloths to as much of your body as possible.
- Sip water.
- If you have vomited and it continues, immediately seek medical attention.

## Q: What should I do if I am working during the heat?

**A:** Pace yourself. If you are not used to working or exercising in a hot environment, start slowly and pick up the pace gradually. Drink fluids early and often. If it's sunny, use sunscreen. If you're getting overheated, confused or lightheaded, STOP all activity. Get into a cool area or at least in the shade, and rest.

## Q: What are heat cramps and who is affected?

**A:** Heat cramps are muscle pains or spasms — usually in the abdomen, arms or legs — that may occur with strenuous activity. People who sweat a lot during strenuous activity are prone to heat cramps. This sweating depletes the body's salt and moisture. The low salt level in the muscles causes painful cramps. Heat cramps may be the first sign of heat illness.

## Q: What should I do if I have heat cramps?

**A:** If medical attention is not necessary, take the following steps:

- Stop all activity and sit quietly in a cool place.
- Drink clear juice or a sports beverage.
- Do not return to strenuous activity for a few hours after the cramps subside.
- If possible, stretch the muscle that is cramping to relieve the muscle spasm.
- Seek medical attention for heat cramps if they do not subside in one hour.
- If you have heart problems or are on a low-sodium diet, seek medical attention for heat cramps.

## Q: What is heat rash?

**A:** Heat rash is skin irritation caused by heavy sweating during hot, humid weather. It can occur at any age but is most common in young children. Heat rash looks like a red cluster of pimples or small blisters. It is more likely to occur on the neck and upper chest, in the groin, under the breasts, and in elbow creases.

## Q: What is the best treatment for heat rash?

**A:** The best treatment for heat rash is to move to a cooler, less humid environment. Keep the affected area dry.

## Q: Should I take salt tablets during hot weather?

**A:** Do not take salt tablets during hot weather unless directed by your health care provider.



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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