

Advice for Older People on Staying Safe in Hot Weather

Written by Kim Calvin
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Risk of heat-related health problems increases with age

Summer often brings excessive heat, which can lead to heat-related problems caused by hyperthermia, an abnormally high body temperature. Older adults and people with chronic medical conditions are particularly susceptible to hyperthermia and are at high risk for heat-related death. The National Institute on Aging (NIA), part of the National Institutes of Health, has some tips to help older people avoid the hazards of hot weather.

Hyperthermia is caused by a failure of the heat-regulating mechanisms of the body to deal with the heat coming from the environment. Heat fatigue, heat syncope (sudden dizziness after prolonged exposure to the heat), heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke are forms of hyperthermia. These conditions can pose special health risks for older adults, and can increase with the combination of outside temperature, general health and individual lifestyle.

Factors that may increase hyperthermia risk include:

- Dehydration.
- Alcohol use.

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- High blood pressure or other health conditions that require changes in diet. For example, people on salt-restricted diets may be at increased risk. However, salt pills should not be used without first consulting a doctor.
- Heart, lung and kidney diseases, as well as any illness that causes general weakness or fever.
- Use of multiple medications. It is important, however, to continue to take prescribed medication and discuss possible problems with a physician.
- Reduced perspiration, caused by medications such as diuretics, sedatives, tranquilizers and certain heart and blood pressure drugs.
- Age-related changes to the skin such as poor blood circulation and inefficient sweat glands.
- Being substantially overweight or underweight.

Lifestyle factors increasing risk for hyperthermia in hot weather can include not drinking enough fluids, living in housing without air conditioning, lack of mobility and access to transportation, overdressing, visiting overcrowded places and not understanding how to respond to the weather condition. Older people, particularly those with chronic medical conditions, should stay indoors on hot and humid days, especially when an air pollution alert is in effect. People without air conditioners should go to places that do have air conditioning, such as senior centers, shopping malls, movie theaters and libraries. Cooling centers, which may be set up by local public health agencies, religious groups and social service organizations in many communities, are another option.

If you suspect that someone is suffering from a heat-related illness:

- Get the person out of the heat and into a shady, air-conditioned or other cool place. Urge the person to lie down.
 - If you suspect heat stroke, call 911.
 - Encourage the individual to shower, bathe or sponge off with cool water.
 - Apply a cold, wet cloth to the wrists, neck, armpits, and/or groin. These are places where blood passes close to the surface of the skin, and the cold cloths can help cool the blood.
- If the person can swallow safely, offer fluids such as water, fruit and vegetable juices, but avoid alcohol and caffeine.

Heat stroke is a life-threatening form of hyperthermia. It occurs when the body is overwhelmed by heat and unable to control its temperature. Heat stroke occurs when someone's body temperature increases significantly (generally above 104 degrees Fahrenheit) and has symptoms such as mental status changes (like confusion or combativeness), strong rapid

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pulse, lack of sweating, dry flushed skin, faintness, staggering or coma. Seek immediate emergency medical attention for a person with any of these symptoms, especially an older adult.

The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services helps eligible households pay for home cooling and heating costs. People interested in applying for assistance should contact their local or state LIHEAP agency or go to: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/liheap>

or

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/liheap/brochure/brochure.html>

For a free copy of the NIA's AgePage on hyperthermia in English or in Spanish, contact the NIA Information Center at [1-800-222-2225](tel:1-800-222-2225) or go to <http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/hyperthermia-too-hot-your-health> or <http://www.nia.nih.gov/espanol/publicaciones/hipertermia> (Spanish).

The NIA leads the federal effort supporting and conducting research on aging and the medical, social and behavioral issues of older people. The Institute's broad scientific program seeks to understand the nature of aging and to extend the healthy, active years of life. For more information on research and aging, go to www.nia.nih.gov.

About the National Institutes of Health (NIH): NIH, the nation's medical research agency, includes 27 Institutes and Centers and is a component of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. NIH is the primary federal agency conducting and supporting basic, clinical and translational medical research, and is investigating the causes, treatments and cures for both common and rare diseases. For more information about NIH and its programs, visit www.nih.gov

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