

Hot Weather Safety Tips for Older Adults

We all know that hot weather can be dangerous. This is especially true for older adults. Every summer, nearly 200 Americans die of health problems caused by high heat and humidity. Most of these individuals happen to be age 50 or older. Hot weather is more likely to cause health problems for older adults for a variety of reasons. These reasons include aging-related physical changes in the body, chronic health conditions, and even side effects of taking some medications.

Staying Safe When It's Too Darn Hot

90°

When the temperature climbs above 90°F, older adults need to be proactive and take precautions. So check the outside temperature on summer days. If it's above 90°, older people should keep in mind the following tips:

■ **STAY OUT OF THE SUN** if possible. If possible, wait to go out until the sun starts to set or until early the next morning. Adjusting when you go outside could mean a difference of several degrees.

■ **STAY HYDRATED.** Drink plenty of cool water, clear juices, and other liquids that don't contain alcohol or caffeine. Alcohol and caffeine can dehydrate you (dry you out).

■ **DRESS APPROPRIATELY.** Whenever you can, try wearing loose, light-colored clothes (dark-colored clothes absorb heat). Top it off with a lightweight, broad-brimmed hat and you are dressing like a pro! These simple changes will help you both stay cool and avoid sunburn.

■ **AIR CONDITIONING** is your friend. Spend as much time as possible in air conditioned spaces. If you don't have an air conditioner, go somewhere that is air-conditioned. Read a book at the library, walk around in indoor malls, watch that new movie at the theater, or meet your friends at the senior center. (Note: The federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) helps adults 65 and older who have limited incomes cover the cost of air conditioners and utility bills. To reach your state's LIHEAP program, call 1-866-674-6327.)

■ **DID SOMEONE SAY SUNBURN?** Use broad spectrum sunscreen with sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher.

■ **COOL DOWN!** Take tepid (not too cold or too hot) showers, baths, or sponge baths when you're feeling warm. Don't have the time? Then wet washcloths or towels with cool water and put them on your wrists, ankles, armpits, and neck.

How to Spot and Treat Health Problems Caused by Heat

It's important to recognize when hot weather is making you sick, and when to get help. Here's a list of health problems caused by too much heat:

Dehydration

What it is: A loss of water in your body. It can be serious if not treated.

Warning signs: Weakness, headache, muscle cramps, dizziness, confusion, and passing out.

What to do: Call your healthcare provider or 911. Meanwhile, drink plenty of water and, if possible, sports drinks such as Gatorade™, which contain important salts called “electrolytes.” Among other things, electrolytes play a key role in regulating your heartbeat. Your body loses electrolytes when you're dehydrated.

Heat stroke

What it is: A very dangerous rise in your body temperature. It can be deadly.

Warning signs: A body temperature of 103°F or higher; red, hot, and dry skin; a fast pulse; headache; dizziness; nausea or vomiting; confusion; and passing out.

What to do: Call 911 immediately. Move to a cool, shady place and take off or loosen heavy clothes. If possible, wet yourself with cool water, or put cloths soaked with cool water on your wrists, ankles, armpits, and neck to lower your temperature. Try to see if you can safely swallow water or sports drinks.

Note: If you are caring for someone else who has heat stroke, only give them water or drinks if they are awake and can swallow.

Heat exhaustion

What it is: A serious health problem caused by too much heat and dehydration. If not treated, it may lead to heat stroke (see above).

Warning signs: Heavy sweating or no sweating, muscle cramps, tiredness, weakness, paleness, cold or clammy skin, dizziness, headache, nausea or vomiting, fast and weak pulse, fainting.

What to do: Without delay, move to a cool, shady place, and drink plenty of cool fluids, such as water or sports drinks. Call 911 right away if you have high blood pressure or heart problems, or if you don't feel better quickly after moving to the shade and drinking liquids.

Heat syncope

What it is: Fainting caused by high temperatures

Warning signs: Dizziness or fainting.

What to do: Lie down and put your feet up, and drink plenty of water and other cool fluids.