

Hot Weather Safety Tips for Older Adults

While summer brings us warmth and bloom, prolonged exposure to excessive heat in summer months can be dangerous. This is especially true for older adults. Every summer, more than 600 Americans die of health problems caused by excessive heat and humidity. Older adults and individuals with chronic medical conditions are at high risk of developing heat-related illnesses, because of aging-related physical changes in the body, chronic health conditions, and even effects of taking some medications.

Staying Safe When It's Too Darn Hot

80°

When the temperature climbs above 80°F, older adults need to be proactive and take precautions to avoid ailments due to excessive heat. Keep in mind the following tips when trying to stay cool.

■ **STAY AWAY** from direct sun exposure as much as possible. If possible, plan your outdoor activities either early in the morning or when the sun starts to set.

■ **AIR CONDITIONING** is your friend in summer. Spend as much time as possible in air conditioned spaces. If you don't have an air conditioner, go somewhere that is air-conditioned. For example, you may 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.)

■ **STAY HYDRATED.** Drink plenty of cool water, clear juices, and other liquids that don't contain alcohol or caffeine. Alcohol and caffeine cause you to lose water in your body by making you urinate more.

■ **DID SOMEONE SAY SUNBURN?** Buy a broad spectrum sunscreen lotion or spray with sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher. Apply the sunscreen liberally to all exposed skin. Also, bugs are abundant in summer, so spray insect repellent when going outdoors.

■ **DRESS APPROPRIATELY.** Whenever you can, try wearing loose, light-colored clothes. Avoid dark-colored clothes as they may 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.

■ **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 exposure to 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: 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. If you don't feel better, call 911. If you feel better after drinking fluids, but have medical conditions like heart failure or take diuretics (“water pills”), you should also call your healthcare provider for a follow-up.

Heat stroke

What it is: A very dangerous rise in your body temperature, which may happen gradually over days of heat exposure in older adults. It can be deadly.

Warning signs: A body temperature of 104°F (40°C) or higher; red, hot, and dry skin; a fast pulse; headache; dizziness; nausea or vomiting; confusion or lethargy; and passing out.

What to do: Call 911 immediately. Move to a cool, shady place and take off or loosen heavy clothes. If possible, douse 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 while waiting for 911.

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. Do not try to give fluids by mouth if the person is drowsy, as it could cause choking.

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. Body temperature is generally between 98.6°F (37°C) and 104°F (40°C).

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.