

Heat related illness

During very hot and extreme heat conditions, people are at greater risk of health problems. These can be specific heat-related illnesses or a worsening of existing medical problems.

Risk is greatest during heat waves and when the temperature hovers about 5°C or more above average for 3 or more days. The risk is increased when high temperatures are combined with increased humidity.

At-risk groups:

- Older people, particularly the frail and those living alone.
- Babies and young children.
- People with existing medical conditions, such as heart disease.
- People on certain medications, in particular fluid tablets.
- Those on fluid restricted diets.
- People exercising or working in a hot environment.
- People who are on medications for mental health conditions or people who use recreational drugs may be at greater risk.

Early signs of heat stress:

- Rising body temperature
- Dry mouth and eyes
- Headache
- Shortness of breath
- Vomiting
- Absence of tears when crying.

During hot conditions:

- Drink enough fluids



- Avoid dehydrating drinks including caffeine, alcohol and drinks with high sugar levels like most soft drinks and energy drinks, as these can interfere with the rapid absorption of fluids
- Minimise physical activity
- If possible, stay out of the sun when the UV and heat is the strongest between 10am and 3pm
- Check on how elderly family, friends and neighbours are coping with the heat
- Open windows and use fans to cool you down
- Stay indoors and possibly seek an air-conditioned environment
- Ensure that young children are having enough fluids and dress them in cool clothing
- Do not leave children and pets in hot cars.

Heat related illness

Heat-related illness occurs when the body absorbs too much heat. This may happen slowly over a day or two of very hot weather. This can be associated with different effects ranging from a mild heat rash or cramps through to heat exhaustion or the more severe and potentially fatal heat stroke.

Act quickly to avoid serious—or even fatal—effects of fully developed heat stroke.

Heat cramps

Heat cramps usually affect people who have sweated a lot during strenuous activity. Cramps may be an early symptom of the more severe condition of heat exhaustion.

If medical attention is not necessary, stop all strenuous activity and rest quietly in a cool place. Increase fluid intake using cool water, clear juice or a low sugar sports drink. Do not return to strenuous activity until a few hours after the cramps subside. Seek medical attention if the cramps continue for more than one hour.

Heat exhaustion

Heat exhaustion is the body's response to gradual depletion of fluid and salt due to sweating.

Warning signs include heavy sweating, paleness, muscle cramps, tiredness and weakness, dizziness, headache, nausea or vomiting, or fainting.

Attempt to cool the person with a cool shower, bath or sponge. The person should rest in a cool place. If possible, move the person to an air-conditioned environment. Give cool non-alcoholic fluids. Avoid high sugar drinks. Ensure they are wearing loose, lightweight clothing. If symptoms are severe or don't improve with treatment, or if the person has high blood pressure or heart problems, seek medical attention immediately.

Heat stroke

Heat stroke is the most serious heat-related illness. It can be fatal. It develops when the body loses its ability to sweat and is unable to cool down. Body temperature rises to 41°C or higher. This can occur rapidly over a period of just 10-15 minutes.

Warning signs include extremely high body temperature (above 39°C); red, hot, dry skin, although in some cases some sweating may still be evident; rapid pulse; throbbing headache; dizziness and nausea.

If heat stroke is suspected, **seek medical help immediately**, as this is a life-threatening emergency. The body temperature must be reduced quickly. Move the person to a cool shaded area. Remove excess clothing. Immerse the person in a tub of cool water, ensuring more than just the extremities are cooled. Alternatively, place the person in a cool shower, spray with cool water from a hose or wrap the person in a cool, wet sheet and fan vigorously. Monitor the body temperature and continue cooling efforts until the body temperature drops below 38°C. Do not give the person fluids to drink unless you are confident they can swallow properly. If unconscious, place the person on their side and clear the airway. If medical attention is delayed, seek further instructions from ambulance or hospital emergency staff.

MORE INFORMATION

- Contact your doctor or 13HEALTH (13 432 584)
- Ring 000 in an emergency
- Contact your local [public health unit](#).