

# Avoiding Heat-Related Stress

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## ***What is heat-related stress?***

Heat-related stress is illness which usually occurs when a person is exposed to a hot environment which overwhelms their body's ability to maintain a normal temperature.

The early symptoms of heat-related stress include headaches, dizziness, faintness, nausea and vomiting. In babies, signs of heat-related stress include restlessness, irritability and a reduced number of wet nappies.

Heat-related stress is a serious medical condition. If not spotted early and managed properly, people can potentially develop life-threatening illness (heat-stroke). Simple measures can be applied to significantly reduce the chance of heat-related stress.

## ***What causes heat-related stress?***

People adapt to heat by sweating, reducing their level of physical activity and moving to a cool environment such as an air-conditioned building. If a person is not able to adapt in this way then their body temperature begins to rise and they become unwell. Heat-related stress can occur in anyone, but those most at risk include:

- young children and babies;
- the elderly;
- pregnant women;
- obese individuals;
- disabled individuals, particularly those with impaired mobility;
- individuals on medications which promote fluid loss or reduce sweating;
- Individuals with pre-existing cardiovascular and/or respiratory disease;
- individuals who exercise or work outdoors; and
- people who are not acclimatised to heat (e.g. overseas visitors).

Heat-related stress can occur on normal summer days, but the risk of developing heat-related stress increases dramatically if the mean temperature meets or exceeds 28 °C. The mean temperature is measured by the maximum temperature from one day and the subsequent night's minimum temperature (e.g. maximum of 38 °C and minimum of 20 °C divided by two equals a mean temperature of 29 °C).

The risk of developing heat-related stress is highest during a 'heat-wave' when the mean temperatures meet or exceed 28 °C for several sequential days. Relatively short exposure to extremely hot environments can also cause heat-related stress (e.g. the interior of a hot car, a tent on a hot day, or periods of direct sun exposure).

## ***How can heat-related stress be prevented?***

Individuals must protect themselves from the dangers of heat-related stress during hot summer days and heat-waves. The following measures should be followed to reduce the chance of suffering heat-related stress:

### **Drink plenty of fluids and avoid dehydration**

- Dehydration reduces your body's ability to cool itself by sweating. Check with your doctor how much you should drink if you are on limited fluids or fluid pills.
- Water is the best fluid to drink.
- Avoid beverages which contain caffeine or alcohol.

### **Stay in a cool environment**

- Stay indoors or in the shade wherever possible.
- Sleep in the coolest part of the house.
- Keep air circulating and use air conditioning if available. If you don't have air conditioning, consider visiting an air-conditioned facility such as:
  - Cinemas;
  - Community centres;
  - Libraries;
  - Public galleries; and
  - Shopping centres.

### **Reduce physical activity**

- Avoid strenuous physical activity.
- If activity is unavoidable, rest often and drink plenty of fluids.

### **Take extra measures to increase cooling**

- Wear light-weight clothing.
- Take a shower, bath or sponge bath.
- Eat regular, light meals.

### **Look out for your neighbours, family and friends**

- Frequently check on older, sick and frail people and neighbours who may need help coping with the heat.
- Never leave children or pets unattended in a motor vehicle as temperatures can rise very rapidly to dangerous levels.

## *How can I protect myself from sunburn?*

Protect yourself from sunburn by (as per Cancer Council ACT SunSmart program):

- Slip on some sun-protective clothing that covers as much skin as possible.
- Slap on SPF30+ sunscreen – make sure it is broad spectrum and water resistant. Put it on 20 minutes before you go outdoors and reapply every two hours afterwards. Sunscreen should never be used to extend the time you spend in the sun;
- Slap on a hat – that protects your face, head, neck and ears;
- Seek shade;
- Slide on some sunglasses.

## *What should I do if I feel dehydrated?*

If you or a family member are experiencing symptoms of dehydration, there are basic first aid steps you can take for the patient:

- Move to a cool place.
- Sit or lie down in a comfortable position.
- Loosen tight clothing and remove unnecessary clothing.
- Sponge the patient with cold water.
- Give the patient cool water to drink.
- Monitor and seek medical aid if the patient does not recover quickly.

**If a person becomes unresponsive, confused or disoriented in the heat they should receive urgent medical attention.**

For more information visit the ACT Health website: [www.health.act.gov.au](http://www.health.act.gov.au)

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