

Key Public Health Messages during Heatwaves

Introduction

A heatwave occurs where there are 5 consecutive days or more with maximum temperature over 25 degrees Celsius (i.e. daily maximum temperature > 25 °C.). However, temperatures > 25 °C on at least two consecutive days can have significant effects on health¹. Death rates start increasing shortly after the temperature rises, with many deaths occurring in the first two days. The Heatwave Plan for England and the World Health Organization's Public health advice on preventing health effects of heat² provide guidance for health service planning and protection of health during heatwaves.

Key Public Health Messages

Top tips for keeping cool

- It is best to avoid getting too hot in the first place. Stay tuned to the weather forecast.
- Remember to think of those who may be more at risk from the effects of heat.
- If you're planning to travel, check the forecast at your destination.
- Learn how to keep cool and safe at home – see HSE guidance³

Stay out of the heat

- Keep out of the sun between 11am and 3pm.
- If you have to go out in the heat, walk in the shade, apply sunscreen with both UVA and UVB protection.
- Avoid extreme physical exertion. If you can't avoid strenuous outdoor activity, like sport, DIY or gardening, keep it for cooler parts of the day, like early morning or evening.
- Wear light, loose-fitting cotton clothes and a hat to shade face, neck and ears.
- Wear wraparound sun glasses with UV protection.
- Wear sun protection factor: factor 30 or over with a 4 or 5 Star UVA rating on any areas that cannot be covered by clothing and a hat.
- Young children, especially babies, and the elderly are more susceptible to sun damage so be extra careful.

¹ Heatwave plan for England, 2019:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/801539/Heatwave_plan_for_England_2019.pdf

² WHO/Europe: Public health advice on preventing health effects of heat. New and updated information for different audiences. 2011. <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/environment-and-health/Climate-change/publications/2011/public-health-advice-on-preventing-health-effects-of-heat.-new-and-updated-information-for-different-audiences>

³ <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/5/publichealth/publichealthdepts/extreme/heatwaves.html>
<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/media/pressrel/hse-hot-weather-advice.html>
<https://www.hse.ie/eng/health/az/h/heat-exhaustion-and-heatstroke/>

Cool yourself down

- Drink plenty of cold drinks, and avoid excess alcohol, caffeine and hot drinks.
- Eat cold foods, particularly salads and fruit with a high water content. Bananas, orange juice and occasional salty snacks can also help replace salts lost due to sweating.
- Take a cool shower, bath or body wash.
- Sprinkle water over the skin or clothing, or keep a damp cloth on the back of your neck.

Keep your environment cool

- Keep your living space cool. This is especially important for infants, the elderly or those with chronic health conditions or those who can't look after themselves.
- Keep windows that are exposed to the sun closed during the day, and open windows at night when the temperature has dropped.
- Close curtains that receive morning or afternoon sun.
- Turn off non-essential lights and electrical equipment – they generate heat.
- Keep plants and bowls of water in the house as evaporation helps cool the air.
- If possible, move into a cooler room, especially for sleeping.
- Electric fans can help but only if temperature is below 35C.

Look out for others

- Keep an eye on isolated, elderly, ill or very young people and make sure they are able to keep cool.
- Ensure that babies, children or elderly people are not left alone in stationary cars.
- Check on elderly or sick neighbours, family or friends every day during a heat wave.
- Be alert and call for medical support if someone is unwell.

Advice on medicines

- Many prescription medicines can reduce your tolerance of heat. You should keep taking your medicines, but take extra care to keep cool.
- Danger symptoms to watch out for in hot weather include: feeling faint and dizzy, short of breath, vomiting or increasing confusion. Take immediate action if - danger symptoms of heatstroke are present: Cool down as quickly as possible. However do not take aspirin or paracetamol – this can make you worse. Do however carry on taking all other prescribed medicines. Seek further advice from a doctor, or ring 999 if the person has collapsed.
- Keep medicines below 25°C or in the refrigerator (read the storage instructions on the packaging).
- Seek medical advice if you are suffering from a chronic medical condition or taking multiple medications.

If you or others feel unwell

- Try to get help if you feel dizzy, weak, anxious or have intense thirst and headache; move to a cool place as soon as possible and measure your body temperature.
- Drink some water or fruit juice to rehydrate.

- Rest immediately in a cool place if you have painful muscular cramps (particularly in the legs, arms or abdomen, in many cases after sustained exercise during very hot weather), and drink oral rehydration solutions containing electrolytes.
- Seek medical attention as needed if heat cramps last more than one hour.
- Consult your doctor if you feel unusual symptoms or if symptoms persist.

Seek advice if you have any concerns

- Contact your doctor or a pharmacist if you are worried about your health during a heat wave, especially if you are taking medication, if you feel unwell or have any unusual symptoms.
- Watch for cramp in your arms, legs or stomach, feelings of mild confusion, weakness or problems sleeping.
- If you have these symptoms, rest for several hours, keep cool and drink water or fruit juice. Seek medical advice if they get worse or don't go away.

If you suspect someone has heatstroke

- Remember, heatstroke can kill. It can develop very suddenly, and rapidly lead to unconsciousness. If you suspect someone has heatstroke, call 999 immediately.
- While waiting for the ambulance, move the person somewhere cooler if possible, increase ventilation by opening windows or using a fan and cool the affected person as quickly as possibly by loosening their clothes, sprinkling them with cold water or wrapping them in a damp sheet. If they are conscious, give them water or fruit juice to drink.
- Encourage them to drink fluids, if they are conscious
- DO NOT give them aspirin or paracetamol if you suspect that they have heatstroke.