



The Dangers Of Extreme Heat In Older Adults



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Most of us look forward to the summer season. Summer is a time for gardening, barbecues, picnicking and golfing. One common theme present throughout all of these activities: being outdoors. While summertime is a great time to enjoy the outdoors, **it can be a particularly dangerous place to be if you're an older adult.**

Extreme heat is a leading cause of preventable death among seniors.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, more people in North America die from extreme heat than earthquakes, hurricanes, lightning, floods and tornadoes combined. Of these preventable heat-related deaths, seniors account for 40 percent, according to the New Jersey Institute for Successful Aging.

Older adults are more prone to heat stress than younger people for several reasons.

- First, older adults are not able to quickly adapt to extreme changes in outside temperature.
- Second, older adults tend to have multiple health conditions, including heart and blood vessel problems, which change the body's normal response to heat.
- Third, they may take multiple medications, which may interfere with the body's normal cooling mechanism - sweating.

There are things that an older adult can do to reduce their risk of heat-related illnesses:

- **Drink plenty of liquids.** Make sure that you're drinking at least eight glasses of water or juice daily. Avoid drinking caffeinated and alcoholic beverages as well as sweet or sugary drinks, as they tend to make us thirstier. If your liquid intake is limited, eat cold fruits that contain high amounts of water such as apples, watermelon and cantaloupe.
- **Keep your house as cool as possible.** If you live in a home that doesn't have air conditioning, then make sure you keep your windows open at night, when it tends to be coolest. If you use fans, be sure they are safe and have no frayed cords. They should

not be left on when you leave the house. Limit your use of the oven or other appliances that emit heat. Spend a couple of hours during the hottest time of the day in an air-conditioned environment such as a local mall or senior center. If you cannot leave your home, take a cool shower or place cool towels around pulse points such as the neck and armpits.

- **Dress for the weather.** Wear cotton, loose fitting, lightweight and light-colored clothing. Natural fabrics are better and do not retain the heat. Avoid exercising or other strenuous activities during the hottest part of the day, which is from noon - 3pm.
- **Enlist the help of your family or friends.** Ask to have a family member or friend call to check on you at least twice per

day to make sure that you are holding up under the strain of the weather. Likewise, if you have an older friend or family member who lives alone, then take the initiative to check in on them during the course of the day.

If you have been subjected to heat and humidity and experience a headache, confusion, dizziness, fainting, heavy sweating, paleness, weakness, or nausea, you could be experiencing a heat-related illness.

To keep heat-related illnesses from becoming heat stroke, get out of the sun and into a cool place; drink plenty of fluids; shower, bathe, or sponge off with cool water; and rest in a cool place. Call your doctor or head to the nearest emergency room to determine if you need further treatment if you don't begin to cool down quickly.

Older adults who have physical limitations or dementia may benefit from having a home health aide with them, especially if they enjoy being outdoors. Keep in mind that simply telling someone with dementia to stay inside the air conditioning on a hot summer day does not mean that they will remember to do so. Having an aide with either yourself or a loved one means that there is someone with a watchful eye present to ensure your safety. A home health aide is the ideal person to recognize a possibly hazardous condition and provide preventative care to avoid it. Only hire a caregiver/aide from a reputable home care agency



who is trained in home care and senior safety. They can provide care on an hourly or live-in basis, depending on the needs of the older adult.

These summer months are a time for enjoying the fresh air, planting flowers, gardening, and soaking up the sun. Just make sure to be cautious that you don't overindulge in the great outdoors on those extremely hot days. Always apply a quality sunscreen, and wear sunglasses when outdoors. Take precautions to keep yourself cool and drink plenty of fluids. Know the signs of heat exhaustion and heat stroke.

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