

Advice for older people on staying safe in hot weather

July 8 2015, by Kim Calvin

Summer weather can pose special health risks to older adults and people with chronic medical conditions. It is critically important that adults particularly susceptible to hyperthermia and other heat-related illnesses know how to safeguard against problems. The National Institute on Aging (NIA), part of the National Institutes of Health, has some tips to help avoid the hazards of hot weather.

Hyperthermia is caused by a failure of the heat-regulating mechanisms of the body. Heat fatigue, heat syncope (sudden dizziness after prolonged exposure to the heat), heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke are forms of hyperthermia. Older adults are at risk for these conditions, and this risk can increase with the combination of higher temperature, individual lifestyle and general health.

Lifestyle factors can include not drinking enough fluids, living in housing without [air conditioning](#), lack of mobility and access to transportation, overdressing, visiting overcrowded places and not understanding how to respond to [hot weather](#) conditions. Older people, particularly those with [chronic medical conditions](#), should stay indoors in cooler spaces on hot and humid days, especially when an air pollution alert is in effect. People without air conditioners should go to places that do have air conditioning, such as senior centers, shopping malls, movie theaters and libraries. Cooling centers, which may be set up by local public health agencies, religious groups and social service organizations in many communities, are another option.

Factors that increase the risk of hyperthermia may include:

- Dehydration.
- High [blood pressure](#) or other health conditions that require changes in diet. For example, people on salt-restricted diets may be at increased risk. However, salt pills should not be used without first consulting a doctor.
- Heart, lung and kidney diseases, as well as any illness that causes general weakness or fever.
- Use of multiple medications. It is important, however, to continue to take prescribed medication and discuss possible problems with a physician.
- Reduced sweating, caused by medications such as diuretics, sedatives, tranquilizers and certain heart and blood pressure drugs.
- Age-related changes to the skin such as [poor blood circulation](#) and inefficient sweat glands.
- Being substantially overweight or underweight.
- Alcohol use.

Heat stroke is a life-threatening form of [hyperthermia](#). It occurs when the body is overwhelmed by heat and unable to control its temperature. Signs and symptoms of heat stroke include a significant increase in body temperature (generally above 104 degrees Fahrenheit), changes in mental status (like confusion or combativeness), strong rapid pulse, lack of sweating, dry flushed skin, feeling faint, staggering or coma. Seek immediate emergency medical attention for a person with heat stroke symptoms, especially an older adult.

If you suspect that someone is suffering from a heat-related illness:

- Get the person out of the [heat](#) and into a shady, air-conditioned or other cool place. Urge them to lie down.

- If you suspect [heat stroke](#), call 911.
- Encourage the individual to shower, bathe or sponge off with cool water if it is safe to do so.
- Apply a cold, wet cloth to the wrists, neck, armpits, and/or groin. These are places where blood passes close to the surface of the skin, and the cold cloths can help cool the blood.
- If the person can swallow safely, offer fluids such as water, fruit and vegetable juices. Avoid alcohol and caffeine.

The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services helps eligible households pay for home cooling and heating costs. People interested in applying for assistance should contact their local or state LIHEAP agency or go to www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/liheap .

More information: For a free copy of the NIA's AgePage Series in English or in Spanish, on hyperthermia, skin and aging or other topics contact the NIA Information Center at 1-800-222-2225 or go to [www.nia.nih.gov/health/publica ... -too-hot-your-health](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publica...-too-hot-your-health); www.nia.nih.gov/espanol/publicaciones/hipertermia (Spanish); [www.nia.nih.gov/health/publica ... /skin-care-and-aging](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publica.../skin-care-and-aging); or www.nia.nih.gov/espanol/publicaciones/cuidado-piel (Spanish).

Provided by National Institutes of Health

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