

Heatwave self-care

WHAT IS A HEATWAVE?

A heatwave is a period of unusual and uncomfortably hot weather that can affect anybody. It can also affect community infrastructure such as the power supply, public transport and other services.

Heatwaves can make existing medical conditions worse and cause heat-related illness, which may be fatal.

It is important to be aware of the effects of heat on the body and how to help yourself stay healthy and feeling well during these periods of extreme heat.

WHO IS A RISK?

- People aged over 65 years, especially those living alone
- People who have a medical condition such as diabetes, kidney disease or mental illness
- People taking medications that may affect the way the body reacts to heat such as:
 - allergy medicines (such as antihistamines)
 - blood pressure and heart medicines (such as beta-blockers)
 - seizure medicines (such as anticonvulsants)
 - 'fluid' tablets (such as diuretics)
 - antidepressants or antipsychotics
- People with problematic alcohol or other drug use
- People with a disability who may not be able to identify or communicate their discomfort or thirst or those who have trouble moving around (such as those who are bed-bound or in a wheelchair)
- People who are overweight or obese
- Pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, babies and young children

- People who work or are physically active outdoors.

SIGNS OF HEAT ILLNESS

- Increased heart rate
- Nausea and vomiting
- Dizziness and feeling faint
- Headaches
- Muscle cramps or spasms and weakness
- Urinating less often

Life-threatening signs may include the above and:

- seizures
- confusion, stroke-like symptoms or reduced level of consciousness
- dry, red, hot skin without sweating.

HEATWAVES AND MEDICATIONS

Some medications may reduce your body's natural response to temperature and increase the risk of heat illness. They may do this by:

- reducing the body's ability to increase blood flow to the skin
- reducing the ability to sweat
- increasing dehydration.

Dehydration may also affect how medications work and increase the risk of side effects.

Some of the medication types involved are listed in Table 1. If you are taking any of them, please discuss with your doctor whether you should modify the dose or take other actions during heatwaves.

Table 1: Medications that may be affected by dehydration

Medication type	Potential effect
Blood pressure medications	Can affect the body's ability to direct blood to different parts of the body including the skin
Antianginal medications (to treat chest pain)	Can affect the body's ability to direct blood to different parts of the body including the skin
Fluid tablets (diuretics)	Can dehydrate
Psychiatric medications	Can block messages in the brain
Decongestants and stimulants	Can impair the body's ability to direct blood to different parts of the body including the skin
Antidepressants	Can reduce sweating
Cold and allergy medications	Can reduce sweating
Digoxin	Levels can be changed by dehydration
Anticonvulsants (to treat seizure)	Levels can be changed by dehydration

This is not a complete list. If you are concerned about your medications and heatwaves, discuss it with your doctor.

HOW TO PREVENT HARM FROM HEAT

- Stay inside during the hottest part of the day, if possible.
 - Block out the sun using curtains, blinds or awnings to help keep your home cool.
 - Drink plenty of fluid. If your doctor normally limits your fluids, check how much to drink during hot weather. Water is best.
 - Avoid caffeinated, energy or alcoholic drinks because they may increase dehydration.
 - Find a cool place in the shade or in a well-ventilated place with fans or air-conditioning. If your home is very hot, consider a community centre, library, cinema or shopping centre.
 - Keep yourself cool by using wet towels, putting your feet in cool water and taking cool (not cold) showers.
 - Wear lightweight, light-coloured, loose-fitting clothing and head protection if outdoors.
 - Limit physical activity and avoid exercising in the heat of the day.
- Monitor the amount and colour of your urine. If you are not passing your usual amount or if the urine is very dark, you need to drink more fluids.
 - Remember 'Slip, slop, slap, seek, slide' at all times when outside – slip on a shirt, slop on 50+ sunscreen, slap on a hat, seek shade or shelter, and slide on some glasses used to block out sun.
 - Don't leave children, adults or animals in parked vehicles.
 - Keep in contact with family or friends.

What to do if you develop any of the signs of heat illness listed above:

Call an ambulance (dial triple zero (000)) for any life-threatening signs.

For less serious signs:

- Rest in a cool, well-ventilated area.
- Drink plenty of fluid; water is best.
- Apply cool wet cloths to your skin.
- Seek medical advice if your condition does not improve.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

For other medical problems see your local doctor or healthcare professional.

For health advice from a registered nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 9096 7770, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email

emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au

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