

Hyperthermia: Too Hot for Your Health



Almost every summer there is a deadly heat wave in some part of the country. Too much heat is not safe for anyone. It is even riskier if you are older or if you have health problems. It is important to get relief from the heat quickly. If not, you might begin to feel confused or faint. Your heart could become stressed, and maybe stop beating.

Your body is always working to keep a balance between how much heat it makes and how much it loses. Your brain is the thermostat. It sends and receives signals to and from parts of your body that affect temperature, such as the spinal cord, muscles, blood vessels, skin, and glands that make substances known as hormones. Too much heat causes sweating. When the sweat dries from your skin, the surface of your body cools and your temperature goes down.

Being hot for too long can cause many illnesses, all grouped under the name **hyperthermia** (hy-per-ther-mee-uh):

Heat cramps are the painful tightening of muscles in your stomach area, arms, or legs. Cramps can result from hard work or exercise. While your body temperature and pulse usually stay normal during heat cramps, your skin may feel moist and cool. Take these cramps as a sign that you are too hot — find a way to cool your body down. Be sure to drink plenty of fluids, but not those containing alcohol or caffeine.

Heat edema is a swelling in your ankles and feet when you get hot. Putting your legs up should help. If that doesn't work fairly quickly, check with your doctor.

Heat syncope is a sudden dizziness that may come on when you are active in the heat. If you take a form of heart medication known as a beta blocker or are not used to hot weather, you are even more likely to feel faint when in the heat. Putting your legs up and resting in a cool place should make the dizzy feeling go away.

Heat exhaustion is a warning that your body can no longer keep itself cool. You might feel thirsty, dizzy, weak, uncoordinated, nauseated, and sweat a lot. Your body temperature stays normal, and skin feels cold and clammy. Your pulse can be normal or raised. Resting in a cool place, drinking plenty of fluids, and getting medical care should help you feel better soon. If not, this condition can progress to heat stroke.

Heat stroke is an emergency — it can be **life threatening!** You need to get medical help right away. Getting to a cool place is very important, but so is treatment by a doctor. Many people die of heat stroke each year. Older people living in homes or apartments without air conditioning or good airflow are at most risk. So are people who don't drink enough water or those with chronic diseases or alcoholism.

Who Is at Risk?

Hundreds of people die from hyperthermia each year during very hot weather. Most are over 50 years old. The temperature outside or inside does not have to hit 100° F for you to be at risk for a heat-related illness.

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What Should I Remember?

Headache, confusion, dizziness, or nausea when you're in a hot place or during hot weather could be a sign of a heat-related illness. Go to the doctor or an emergency room to find out if you need treatment.

To keep heat-related illnesses from becoming a dangerous heat stroke, remember to:

- Get out of the sun and into a cool place — air-conditioning is best.
- Offer fluids, but avoid alcohol and caffeine. Water and fruit and vegetable juices are best.
- Shower or bathe, or at least sponge off with cool water.
- Lie down and rest, if possible in a cool place.
- Visit your doctor or an emergency room if you don't cool down quickly.

Things you can do to lower your risk of heat-related illness:

- Drink plenty of liquids. Every day you should drink at least eight glasses to keep your body working properly. Heat tends to make you lose fluids so it is very important to drink at least that much, if not more, when it is hot. Avoid drinks containing caffeine or alcohol. They make you lose more fluids. If your doctor has told you to limit your liquids, ask what you should do when it is very hot.
- Check with your local Area Agency on Aging to see if there is a program that provides window air conditioners to seniors who qualify.
- If you think you can't afford to run your air conditioner in the summer, contact your local Area Agency on Aging. Or, ask at your local senior center. They may know if there are any programs in your community to aid people who need help paying their cooling bills. The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is one possible source.
- Ask a friend or relative to drive you to a cool place on very hot days if you don't have a car or no longer drive. If necessary, take a taxi. Don't stand outside waiting for a bus.
- Dress for the weather. Some people find natural fabrics such as cotton to be cooler than synthetic fibers. Light-colored clothes feel cooler.
- Don't try to exercise or do a lot of activities when it is hot.

The Signs of Heat Stroke

- Fainting, possibly the first sign,
- Body temperature over 104° F,
- A change in behavior — confusion, being grouchy, acting strangely, or staggering, Dry flushed skin and a strong rapid pulse or a slow weak pulse,
- Not sweating, despite the heat, acting delirious, or being in a coma.

Source: <http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/hyperthermia.htm>

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