



Extreme heat – health advice

Caring for an older person during extreme heat

An older person can be at increased risk of heat-related illness especially if they live alone, have a medical condition or take certain medicines. Being frail, not able to move as easily, having dementia or a mental illness, can affect an older person's ability to take adequate care of themselves in hot weather.

The following advice will help you, as a carer, to put together a plan to assist an older person to cope during extreme heat.

- Arrange to check on an older person twice a day during extreme heat, especially those living alone. Visit them if you can, rather than just talking on the phone. You need to make sure they are drinking enough water and be able to spot any changes to their physical condition.
- Make sure you know what to do for an older person if there is a power failure and how they will be kept cool if this happens.
- Check whether the older person's phone would work if there is no electricity, as some phones do not. If they have a safety alarm pendant, make sure this would also work if there is no power.
- It is very important that people who care for others also look after themselves in extreme heat, otherwise their own health may be at risk, as well as their ability to care for others.

Keeping cool

- Encourage an older person to use a fan or air-conditioner if they have one. Check the air-conditioner is set to 'cool' before turning it on.
- Look into what concessions are available on energy bills, as some older people are worried about using their fans or air-conditioner because of the costs. For further information and application details visit www.concessions.tas.gov.au or call (03) 6232 7050.
- Taking an older person to an air-conditioned local library or shopping centre can offer them, and you, some relief during extreme heat.
- Encourage an older person to take simple steps to keep cool such as:
 - using a cool, wet cloth to wipe their arms and neck, or putting their feet in a bowl of cool water
 - making water or cordial ice cubes to suck when hot
 - putting a bowl of ice cubes in front of a fan to create a cool breeze
 - sleeping with just a sheet over them.
- Be on the lookout for symptoms of heat-related illness, such as increased thirst, tiredness, feeling dizzy or faint, muscle spasms or cramps, headache, or loss of appetite.
- If an older person seems to be suffering from heat stress, they need to be cooled down straightaway. Use cool baths or showers, or place cool, wet towels on their neck and underarms.

- **Call a doctor or an ambulance (000) if their condition does not improve within an hour after taking steps to cool them down, or if they have any heat-related symptoms that are causing concern.**

Eating and drinking

- An older person may not always be able to tell when they are thirsty, so encourage them to drink water regularly, unless their doctor has advised them to limit the amount of fluid they drink. Avoid tea, coffee or alcohol.
- It is a good idea for an older person to have a bottle of water with them at all times in the heat to avoid becoming dehydrated.
- Encourage them to eat smaller meals more often during hot weather. Using stoves or ovens less also keeps the temperature cooler in their home and reduces the risk of accidentally leaving them on.
- Ensure that food needing refrigeration is not left out.

Clothing and personal aids

- As the ageing process causes an older person to have reduced circulation and a lessened ability to sweat, they may dress in clothing that can cause them to overheat. Encourage them to wear lightweight, light-coloured and loose fitting clothing. Natural fibres like cotton or linen are best, not synthetic or nylon fabrics.
- Broad-spectrum sunscreen (minimum SPF30+) should always be worn by an older person, even if they only go outside for a short time – their skin is much thinner and can burn easily. It should be applied under the sleeves and collar of a blouse or shirt where the neck is exposed and on the legs/feet if wearing shorts or sandals.
- Wearing a wide-brimmed hat (at least 7.5cm wide), or a legionnaire or bucket-style hat that shades the face, neck and ears is important.
- Sunglasses should always be worn outside and taken off before going inside to prevent an accident. Pausing inside for a few minutes is a good idea to help eyes adjust from the bright sunlight.
- Check that an older person's wheelchair, walker and other metal equipment they use does not become hot to touch, as this can cause a burn.



Medicines

- If an older person takes prescribed medicines they **must** continue to take these during times of extreme heat.
- Some medicines can make them more prone to sunburn and heat stress, so extra care should be taken to watch for signs they are becoming affected by the heat.
- Speak to a doctor or a pharmacist if you need more advice on particular medicines.

For more information, visit www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/peh/alerts/standing_health_alerts/extreme_heat