

Health

Feeling the heat?

Central Victoria is scorching and with temperatures set to soar again it's important we all know how to stay safe in the heat, recognise the symptoms of heat-induced medical conditions and how to help someone who is affected.

When we think of natural hazards and fatalities in this country, heatwaves might not automatically spring to mind. But in actual fact, heatwaves have killed more Australians than all other natural hazards combined.

Heat-induced illnesses include dehydration, heat exhaustion and heat stroke. While dehydration and heat exhaustion might be milder conditions they often require medical treatment and hospitalisation. If left untreated they can lead to heat stroke, a condition that is fatal in up to 80 per cent of cases.

When the weather is this hot everyone is at risk. However, there are people in the community who are more likely to become unwell. These groups include the very young, women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, people who are overweight and people working outside.

Di McPherson from Castlemaine Health's complex care team, works with people in the community with chronic diseases and says managing hot weather is particularly important for this group.

"Heat-induced illness can exacerbate symptoms of existing conditions such as diabetes, heart and respiratory conditions, placing people at greater risk of complications," says Di.

"These people can become very unwell quite quickly and should seek medical attention if they are experiencing symptoms."

Castlemaine Health nurse practitioner, Jude Bulten agrees and says that other complications can arise in the heat for this group.

"For example, people with chronic kidney disease or who have heart failure need to be careful about increasing their fluid intake when it's hot, something we encourage most people to do," she says.

"Their intake needs to be carefully managed by their doctor."

A heatwave can also be more serious for people aged over 65 and those with cognitive conditions.

"Older people's ability to adapt to the heat is reduced," says Jude.

"The body doesn't cool itself down or sweat as a younger body does and the thirst mechanism doesn't work as effectively. They can also be loath to put their air conditioners on, even when it's sweltering, because of the cost."

"People with a cognitive impairment such as dementia often don't recognise the same cues for thirst, or removing heavy clothes."

"Both these groups rely on family, friends and neighbours to keep them safe during a heatwave," she says.

Heat-induced conditions

Could you recognise the symptoms of a heat-induced condition? Do you know what to do if you or someone else is affected?

Dehydration

Dehydration happens when the body doesn't have enough water to carry out normal functions. It can happen as a result of excessive sweating and losing too much fluid in the heat. Symptoms include: dizziness, tiredness, muscle cramps, excessive thirst, dark yellow urine, loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting.

Heat exhaustion

Heat exhaustion is the body's reaction to losing excessive amounts of water and salt,



usually as a result of sweating. Symptoms include: Heavy sweating, pale skin, muscle cramps, fast heart rate, feeling weak and dizzy, irritable, drowsy, nausea, vomiting and headaches.

What should I do?

For dehydration and heat exhaustion remove excess clothing, sip cool fluids and have a cool shower, bath or sponge bath. Put cool packs under the armpits, on the groin or the back of the neck. Move to a cool place, (air conditioned if possible), and lie down. If symptoms continue for more than one hour, seek medical attention.

Heat stroke

Heat stroke is a life-threatening emergency. Heat stroke occurs when the body's temperature rises above 40.5 °C. It is sometimes called hyperthermia and can lead to organ damage and death.

Symptoms include: A sudden rise in body temperature, lack of sweat (sweating often stops and skin becomes red, hot and dry), a dry and swollen tongue, rapid pulse and shallow, rapid breathing. People may also experience intense thirst, headache, nausea, vomiting and dizziness. They may appear confused, exhibit aggressive behaviour and experience stroke like symptoms including slurred speech, seizures and a loss of consciousness.

What should I do?

Call triple zero (000) immediately and ask for an ambulance. Try to lower the body temperature. Move the person to a cool place, preferably air conditioned, remove excess clothing and, if they are conscious, give them small sips of water. Apply cool packs to the armpits, groin or back of the neck, or use a sponge or spray bottle to wet the skin. Do not give aspirin or paracetamol.

If the person is unconscious, lay them on their side in the recovery position, check their breath properly and perform CPR if needed.

Q&A

How do I avoid heat-induced illness?

Drink plenty of fluids - Water is best but you can also try diluted fruit juice, weak cordial or tea and even an icy pole.

Keep yourself cool - Stay inside as much as possible. If you are outside avoid the hottest part of the day and wear a hat and lightweight, loose clothing. If you don't have adequate cooling at home consider going to the local library, shopping centre or to visit friends.

Keep your house cool - close windows, curtains and blinds. Use air-conditioning if you have it, electric fans and cool flannels or cloths if you don't.

Plan ahead - Check the forecast so you can avoid being outside, at least during the hottest part of the day. Postpone, cancel or reschedule activities. Get any groceries or medications beforehand. Heat can also affect power and services like transport so have backup plans in place.



Castlemaine Health nurse Di McPherson and nurse practitioner Jude Bulten

142 Cornish Street
Castlemaine Vic 3450
(P) 03 5471 1555

f /castlemainehealth
www.castlemainehealth.org.au



castlemaine
HEALTH