

Heatwave health

Australian summers are getting hotter. According to the Bureau of Meteorology summer 2018/19 was our warmest on record, bringing heatwaves to a number of regions across the country. Only a few weeks into summer 2019/20 and we're already feeling the sting of intense heat in Victoria, with the likelihood of more on the way.

The Bureau defines a heatwave as three or more days of unusually high maximum and above average minimum temperatures. These days of extreme, prolonged heat top the list as the most dangerous conditions in this country, killing more Australians than all other natural hazards combined.

"When it gets hot and stays hot, things get difficult, for everyone," says Castlemaine Health chronic disease program nurse, Ebony Coles.

"It's important we all know how to stay safe in the heat, recognise the symptoms of heat-induced illness and help someone who is affected."

Heat-induced illness

This is a higher level leading than Dehydration, heat exhaustion and heat stroke. They are all examples of heat induced illness

Heat can cause illnesses such as dehydration and heat exhaustion, which can lead to heatstroke, a life-threatening condition which is fatal in up to 80 per cent of cases.

Certain groups in our communities are particularly vulnerable, these include older people, the very young, women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, people who are overweight and people working outside.

Heat can also worsen the condition of someone who already has an illness such as diabetes, heart and respiratory conditions, chronic kidney disease and thyroid issues.

"It's important to keep in touch with friends, family or neighbours who may need help during warmer weather, especially on any extreme heat day," says Castlemaine Health nurse practitioner, Jude Bulten.

"Older people or people with a cognitive impairment such as dementia may need prompting to remember to drink, to dress appropriately or to turn on their air conditioners even when it's sweltering," says Jude.

"Confusion can be an early sign of a heat-induced illness. This can be tricky to pick up in this group so it's important to be on the look out for behaviour that is out of the ordinary, or more confused than normal."

Dehydration

Occurs when the body doesn't have enough water to carry out normal functions as a result of excessive sweating and losing too much fluid in the heat.



Symptoms: Dizziness, tiredness, muscle cramps, excessive thirst, dark yellow urine, loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting.

Treatment: For mild dehydration, remove excess clothing, sip cool fluids and have a cool shower, bath or sponge bath. Avoid drinking alcohol or caffeinated drinks.

Move to a cool place, (air conditioned if possible) and lie down.

Heat exhaustion

The body's reaction to losing excessive amounts of water and salt, usually as a result of sweating.

Symptoms: Heavy sweating, pale skin, muscle cramps, fast heart rate, dizziness, irritability, nausea, vomiting and headaches.

Treatment: 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

Occurs when the body's temperature rises above 40.5 °C and is a life-threatening emergency.

Symptoms: A sudden rise in body temperature, lack of sweat, 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.

Treatment: 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 they can breathe properly and perform CPR if needed.



Castlemaine Health nurse practitioner Jude Bulten and chronic disease program nurse Ebony Coles.

Christmas Celebrations

Q & A

Q: I'm planning a Christmas gathering and the forecast is for hot weather what should I do?

A: If possible plan to have most of the event indoors and reduce the heat by opting for salads and other cool or cold foods instead of the traditional roast meat and veg. Offer plenty of alternatives to alcohol as excess consumption on a hot day increases the risk of dehydration. Keep a particularly close eye on any older people who can be more affected by the heat.

Q: Why do muscles cramp when we're dehydrated?

A: A range of minerals, electrolytes and other chemicals enable muscle tissue to contract and relax. Dehydration is thought to disturb the body's balance of minerals and electrolytes and make muscles more susceptible to cramping.

Avoiding heat-induced illness

Stay hydrated

- Drink plenty of fluids. Water is best but you can also try diluted fruit juice, weak cordial or even an icy pole. Take frequent small sips.
- If you have a chronic condition such as kidney disease or heart failure prepare for hot weather now by speaking to your doctor about safely increasing your fluid intake.

Stay cool

- Stay inside as much as possible and block out the sun by closing curtains and blinds.

- Turn on your air conditioning. If you're worried about cost, relief is available through programs like the Utilities Relief Grant Scheme for certain groups.
- If you don't have air conditioning use electric fans and cool flannels or wet towels, put your feet in cool water and take cool (not cold) showers. Visit the local library, shopping centre, cinema or friends with air conditioning.
- Dress lightly.
- Prepare for power outages.

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.
- Avoid intense activity like exercise, renovating and gardening.
- If you do have to go out wear a hat, sunscreen and lightweight, loose clothing. Heat can also affect power and services like transport so have backup plans in place.
- Store medicines safely at the recommended temperature.

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