

# heatwave

SUPPORTING VULNERABLE PEOPLE  
BEFORE AND DURING A HEATWAVE

Advice for residential and nursing home managers and staff

Extreme heat is dangerous to everyone. During a heatwave, when temperatures remain abnormally high over more than a couple of days, it can prove fatal. Climate change means heatwaves are likely to become more common in England. In one hot spell in London in August 2003, deaths among people aged over 75 rose by 60 per cent.

This factsheet is part of a national programme to reduce the health risks by advising people what to do in the event of a heatwave, before it happens.

You should be reading this if you work in or manage a residential or nursing home, where people are especially at risk during a heatwave. You are strongly urged to make the following preparations **before** a heatwave is forecast.

## What are the risks?

**Heat exhaustion** is usually one of the first signs that someone is at risk of developing heatstroke. Symptoms include headaches, dizziness, nausea and vomiting, muscle weakness or cramps, pale skin, weak pulse and high temperature.

**Heatstroke** can develop if the symptoms of heat exhaustion are left untreated. It can also occur suddenly and without warning. Symptoms include confusion and disorientation, convulsions, unconsciousness, racing, thumping pulse, flushed, hot and dry skin, and very sudden rise in temperature. Heatstroke can result in organ failure, brain damage or death.

## Advance preparations

### The building

- Check that windows can be shaded, preferably by curtains rather than by metal Venetian blinds, which can make conditions worse. If these are fitted, check they can be raised.
- Check there are no problems opening windows, including security considerations.
- Ensure staff know which rooms are most easy to keep cool, and which are the most difficult, and review the distribution of residents accordingly.
- If one exists, check the cooling or air conditioning system works properly. It should be able to keep the air temperature at or below 25°C in at least one large room. Otherwise consider installing or renting an air conditioning unit.
- Make sure you have enough thermometers to monitor accurately temperatures throughout the building.

## Facilities

- Check you have an adequate supply of fans and water sprays.
- Check water and ice are widely available.
- Arrange for cold drinks to be distributed in the event of a heatwave.
- Plan to adapt menus to cold meals, preferably with a high water content, like fruit and salads, in consultation with residents.

## Working arrangements

Work out a protocol for changes to management arrangements in the event of a heatwave to cover:

- Mobilisation of staff, including recall of those on holiday.
- Changes to rotas.
- Getting extra help from relatives of residents.
- Getting extra help from volunteers.

## Residents

- Make sure you know who is most at risk (see Additional notes) – ask primary care staff if you are unsure.
- Ensure you have protocols to monitor residents most at risk and to provide additional care and support.
- Ask GPs of at-risk residents about possible changes in treatment or medication in the event of a heatwave.
- Check that residents have light, loose-fitting, cotton clothing to wear.

## If a heatwave is forecast for your region

- Make sure you have taken the steps outlined above.
- Check local weather forecasts.
- Check that staff and others, such as volunteers, know what to do during a heatwave.
- Suggest all residents consult their GP about possible changes to their treatment and/or medication.

## During a heatwave

### Try to keep the care home as cool as possible

- Keep curtains and windows closed while the temperature outside is higher than it is inside.
- Open windows once the temperature outside has dropped lower than it is inside. This may not be until very late at night or in the early hours of the morning.
- Discourage residents from physical activity and going out during the hottest part of the day (11am-3pm).
- Monitor temperatures inside the building.

### Monitor residents

- Check body temperature and weight regularly.
- Watch for any changes in behaviour.
- Watch for signs of headache, unusual tiredness, weakness, giddiness, disorientation or sleeping problems.

### Reduce the risk of heatstroke

- Encourage residents to remain in the coolest parts of the home as much as possible.
- Monitor their fluid intake, particularly if they are not always able to drink unaided.
- Advise them to avoid caffeine (coffee, tea, colas) or very sweet drinks, and alcohol.
- Encourage them to wear light, loose, cotton clothes to absorb sweat and prevent skin irritation.
- Regularly sprinkle or spray cool water on exposed parts of the body.
- Arrange cool showers or baths, if possible.

## Emergency treatment

**If you suspect someone has heatstroke, call 999. While waiting for the ambulance:**

- Take the person's temperature.
- If possible, move them somewhere cooler.
- Cool them down as quickly as possible by giving them a cool shower, sprinkling them with water or wrapping them in a damp sheet, and using a fan to create an air current.
- Encourage them to drink fluids, if they are conscious.
- Do **not** give aspirin or paracetamol.

### Additional notes

**At-risk groups include:**

- Older people, especially those over 75.
- People suffering from mental ill health, those with dementia, and those who rely on help from other people to manage day-to-day activities.
- People who are bed-bound.
- People taking certain types of medication.
- People suffering from chronic ill health.

### Further information

The full heatwave plan can be accessed on the Department of Health website at [www.dh.gov.uk/publications](http://www.dh.gov.uk/publications). It outlines the responsibilities of health and social care organisations at different stages during a heatwave.

NHS Direct Online at [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk) can provide additional advice on heatstroke and other heat-related conditions.

You can get advice on skin protection during hot weather from the Cancer Research UK SunSmart campaign website at [www.cancerresearchuk.org/sunsmart/](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/sunsmart/)



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