



# Caring for someone in a heatwave

Treatment, advice  
and prevention



**Gateshead**  
Council

[www.gateshead.gov.uk](http://www.gateshead.gov.uk)

# This leaflet gives you more information on how to care for someone who may be affected by a heatwave.

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.

**Some groups are more at risk than others. Those who are considered to be in 'at-risk' groups include:**

- Older people, especially those over 75 and/or living on their own.
- Babies and young children, especially under four years old.
- 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 taking certain types of medication or suffering from chronic ill health.
- People with an already raised temperature from an infection.
- People using psychoactive drugs, including alcohol or illicit drugs.
- People who are bed-bound.
- People who have previously experienced problems in adapting to extreme heat.

*In one hot spell in London in August 2003, deaths among people aged over 75 rose by 60 per cent.*

## 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.

## Reducing the risk

### Before a heatwave

- Heatwaves can happen suddenly, and rapid rises in temperature affect vulnerable people very rapidly.
- Work together with family and friends to plan ahead to make sure that care and support for people at risk can be accessed in the event of a heatwave.

## Environment

- Check if/that any south-facing windows, which let in most sunlight, can be shaded, preferably with curtains. Metal Venetian blinds may make things worse.
- Check that the environment can be properly ventilated, without causing any additional health risk, discomfort or security problems.
- Consider the possibility of moving the person to a cooler room.

## Facilities

- Check fridges and freezers work properly.
- Check fans and/or air conditioning work properly.
- Check that people have light, loose-fitting, cotton clothing to wear.
- If you plan to move the person somewhere cooler in the event of a heatwave, consider what equipment or help you might need.

## During a heatwave

### Keep out of the heat

- Keep curtains at windows exposed to the sun closed while the temperature outside is higher than it is inside.
- Once the temperature outside has dropped lower than it is inside, open the windows.
- Use fans, particularly if the area is difficult to keep cool.

## Keep body temperature down

- Make sure your 'patient' is wearing light, loose, cotton clothes to absorb sweat and prevent skin irritation.
- Suggest sprinkling clothes with water regularly, and splashing cool water on their face and the back of their neck.
- Recommend cold food, particularly salads and fruit with a high water content.
- Advise them to drink regularly, preferably water or fruit juice, but avoid alcohol and caffeine (tea, coffee, colas). Offer fluids frequently and ensure water jugs are kept topped up more regularly than usual.

### People who suffer from the following medical complaints may be more at risk of heat exhaustion.

- Cardiovascular conditions
- Obesity
- Malnutrition
- Diabetes
- Parkinson's Disease
- Respiratory or renal insufficiency
- Alzheimer's or related diseases

*continued over...*

## What to do in an emergency

- 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.

**If you are worried about a friend or relative, who has suffered heat exhaustion, who is not improving following the advice above, contact their GP immediately.**

**This leaflet is available on request  
in large print, Braille or audio tape  
or in your language on request.  
Contact 0191 433 2076**