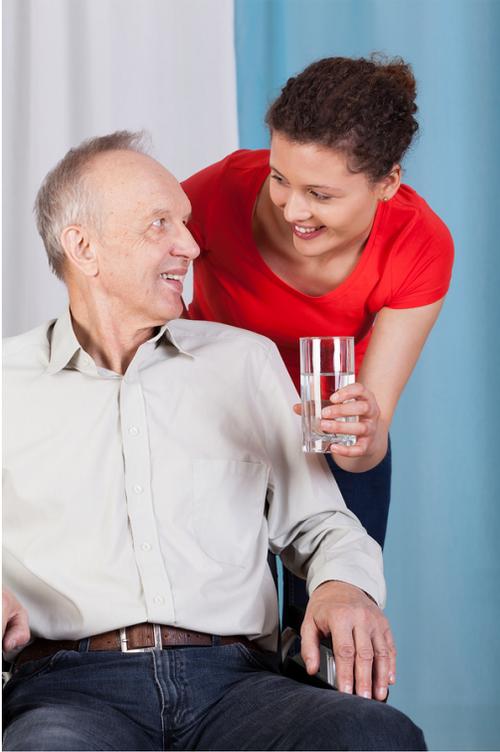


Overheating & Seniors



No matter what your age, there's nothing fun about sweating out a heat wave. The air gets thick, asphalt turns sticky, and a walk to the corner can feel like an ordeal. But if you're a senior citizen, hot weather can be much more than just a nuisance. The body's natural defenses against heat can break down with age, putting seniors at risk for heat stroke, heat exhaustion, and other serious disorders.

Several factors make senior citizens especially vulnerable to hot weather. Older bodies can be slow to sense and respond to changes in heat, so seniors often don't start sweating until their temperature has already soared. Even when the body's cooling devices kick in, they probably don't work as well as they used to. Sweat glands can grow less efficient with age, and other normal changes in the skin slow down the release of heat.

In addition, many common conditions can hamper an older person's ability to regulate temperature, including diseases of the heart, lung, and kidneys; high blood pressure; diabetes; and other conditions that cause poor circulation. Finally, several medications commonly prescribed to seniors can affect the body's ability to cool down; these include antidepressants, motion sickness drugs, and blood pressure medications.

For all of these reasons, it's essential for seniors and their loved ones to understand the signs of heat stroke and heat exhaustion, the two most common forms of heat-related illnesses.

What is heat stroke?

Heat stroke, which can be fatal, occurs when the body can't control temperature. The victim's temperature climbs past 103 degrees and may even reach 106 in as little as 10 minutes. In addition to high temperature, symptoms may include the following:

- Red, hot skin with no sweating
- Moist skin, when caused by exertion
- Rapid pulse
- Intense headache

- Confusion
- Nausea
- Dizziness
- Unconsciousness

If you suspect someone is suffering from heat stroke, have someone call an ambulance immediately while you do everything you can to keep the victim cool. If possible, place him in a cold bath or shower. At the very least, put him in the shade and douse him with water. If you have a thermometer, check his temperature regularly and keep cooling him until it drops below 102. If there is violent twitching of the muscles, don't give the victim any fluids or put any object in his mouth. If he vomits, turn him on his side to keep the airway open.

How does heat stroke differ from heat exhaustion?

Heat exhaustion occurs when the body loses large amounts of salts and water through sweating. It is not especially dangerous on its own, but it can quickly progress to heat stroke. Watch for these warning signs:

- Heavy sweating
- Low blood pressure
- Muscle cramps
- Dark urine
- Weak, rapid pulse
- Headache
- Nausea or vomiting
- Fainting

You should call for medical help immediately if the victim has heart disease or high blood pressure, if the symptoms are severe, or if they last for more than a half hour. Otherwise, keep her temperature down by moving her to an air-conditioned room, giving her cool drinks, or putting her in a cool shower or bath.

How can I prevent heat exhaustion and heat stroke?

The best way to stay cool during a heat wave is to stay indoors with the air conditioner on high. If you don't have an air conditioner, consider taking a trip to the mall, library, or movies for a couple of hours. A fan can help, but it can't take the place of an air conditioner. If the temperature reaches the 90s, even the best fan may not protect you from heat exhaustion or heat stroke.

When you do go outside on a hot day, use common sense. Drink more than you need to quench your thirst, and if you're sweating heavily, choose fruit drinks or sports beverages to replace lost minerals. If you plan to exercise, start out slowly,

particularly if your body isn't used to hot weather. At the first sign of lightheadedness or weakness, stop exercising and get yourself to a cool place immediately.

Heat waves can be deadly for seniors. If you know of any older people living in homes without air conditioning, check on them at least twice a day when the temperature reaches 90 and above.

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