

# Excessive Heat and Older Adults

## About Excessive Heat Exposure

**Excessive heat exposure** caused 8,015 deaths in the United States from 1979-2003, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). People age 65 years and older are more prone to heat stress than younger people because older adults:

- Do not adjust as well as young people to sudden changes in temperature;
- Are more likely to have a chronic medical condition that upsets normal body responses to heat; and
- Are more likely to take prescription medicines that impair the body's ability to regulate its temperature or that inhibit perspiration.



Other conditions that increase a person's risk include age, obesity, fever, dehydration, heart disease, mental illness, poor circulation, sunburn and prescription drug and alcohol use.

## Types of Heat-related Illnesses

- **Heat Cramps** are muscle cramps, most often in the legs, caused by not drinking enough to replace the fluids and body salts lost from sweating. They are not life-threatening, but can lead to heat exhaustion. **To treat heat cramps**, drink plenty of non-caffeinated, non-alcoholic fluids, such as water or sports drinks, get rest and, if possible, get into a cool environment, such as air conditioning.
- **Heat Exhaustion** is a serious and potentially life-threatening condition caused by not enough fluids in the system, high environmental temperatures and body temperatures over 102 degrees. **Symptoms** include nausea, extreme weakness, vomiting, lightheadedness, fainting, rapid heart beat and low blood pressure. In addition, a person with heat exhaustion may have skin that is cool and clammy (heavy sweating) and pale or red. **To treat heat exhaustion**, relocate to a cooler environment and rest lying down with feet elevated, drink plenty of non-alcoholic, non-caffeinated beverages, loosen or remove clothing, cool the body with wet towels and fanning or a cool shower or bath, then seek medical attention.

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## Types of Heat-related Illnesses (continued)

- **Heat Stroke** is a serious and life-threatening condition caused by the body's failure to adequately regulate its own internal temperature when the environment around it is hot and humid. **Symptoms** include red-hot, flushed, dry skin (usually with a lack of sweating), high body temperature (usually 105-106 degrees), headache, rapid pulse, disorientation or strange behavior, hallucination, seizures and unconsciousness. **To treat heat stroke**, seek emergency medical help immediately, move to a cool environment, lie down with feet elevated, drink water and cool the body with wet towels, cold packs and fanning.

## Preventing Heat-related Illnesses

Interestingly, many of the things you would do to treat heat-related illness are the same things that can prevent it in the first place. When the temperature and humidity are high:



- **Drink plenty of cool, non-alcoholic beverages.** Everyone should increase their fluid intake in hot weather, regardless of physical activity. Avoid extremely cold liquids because they can cause cramps. Also, avoid fluids that contain large amounts of sugar because they can cause your body to lose fluid.
- **Wear lightweight clothing and rest frequently.** If possible, remain indoors in the heat of the day and avoid strenuous activity.
- **Take a cool shower, bath or sponge bath.**
- **Seek an air-conditioned environment.** If you don't have access to air conditioning at home, visit an air-conditioned public place, such as a store or public library.

## Help Protect Elderly Relatives and Neighbors

If someone you know is at increased risk of heat-related illness - either due to age or medical condition, please visit them during excessive heat and humidity, and watch them for symptoms of heat exhaustion or heat stroke. Make sure the temperature inside their home is not excessive. Buy or loan them a fan. Take them to air-conditioned locations if they don't have access to transportation.