

Keeping Your Cool On Very Hot Days

Q: Are seniors at greater risk for hyperthermia?

A: Yes. Too much heat is not safe for anyone, but most people who die from hyperthermia are over the age of 50.

There are several heat-related illnesses grouped under the name 'hyperthermia.' Here is the list:

- **Heat syncope:** sudden dizziness while you are active in hot weather. If you are not used to being out in hot weather, or you take a beta blocker to slow down your heart, you are even more likely to feel faint. If you feel dizzy, find a cool place to sit down---air conditioning is best---put your legs up, and drink water to make the dizziness go away. Drink water throughout the day, especially on a hot day before you exercise or go for a walk.
- **Heat cramps:** painful tightening of muscles in your stomach, arms, or legs. Cramps can result from hard work or exercise. Your body temperature and pulse may stay normal, but your skin may feel moist and cool. Rest in the shade to cool your body down, and drink plenty of fluids—but avoid alcohol and caffeine.
- **Heat edema:** swelling in your ankles and feet when you get hot. Put your legs up to reduce swelling. Check with your doctor if the swelling doesn't go down soon.
- **Heat exhaustion:** your body can no longer keep itself cool. You feel thirsty, dizzy, weak, uncoordinated, and nauseated. You may sweat a lot. Your body temperature may seem normal, but your skin may feel cold and clammy. You may have a rapid pulse rate. Look for a cool place, stop to rest, and get some water to drink. If you don't feel better soon, contact your doctor. Heat exhaustion can lead to heat stroke.

- **Heat stroke: a medical emergency.** Older people living in homes or apartments without air conditioning or fans are at most risk. People who become dehydrated or those with chronic diseases or alcoholism are also at most risk. The signs of heat stroke are: fainting feeling confused, agitated, staggering, being grouchy, or acting strangely; a rise in body temperature over 104°F (40°C); dry, flushed skin; a strong, rapid pulse or a slow, weak pulse; not sweating, even if it's hot.

There are certain health problems that put you at greater risk for hyperthermia: heart or blood vessel problems; poorly working sweat glands or changes in your skin; being very overweight or underweight; heart, lung or kidney disease; drinking alcohol; conditions treated by drugs, such as diuretics, sedatives, tranquilizers, and some heart and high blood pressure medicines, which may make it harder for your body to cool itself.

If you live in a home or apartment without fans or air conditioning, try to keep your house as cool as possible. Limit your use of the oven. Keep your shades, blinds, or curtains closed during the hottest part of the day. Open your windows at night.

If your house is hot, go to a cooler place—like a shopping mall, movies, library, senior center, or a friend's house. Don't stand outside in the heat waiting for a bus. Dress for the weather: some people find that cotton is cooler than synthetic fibers. Don't try to exercise or do a lot of activities outdoors when it's hot.

Listen to weather reports before going outside. Shower, bathe, or sponge off with cool water. Lie down and rest in a cool place.

Heat and humidity can be especially hard on older people, so respect the risk that hot days can bring. Use these tips to keep yourself cool when the heat is on.