

## PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

No. 100.5

### *HEAT STRESS AND POWER OUTAGES*

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#### WHAT IS HEAT STRESS?

Heat stress occurs when our body is unable to cool itself enough to maintain a healthy temperature. Normally, the body cools itself by sweating, but sometimes sweating isn't enough and the body temperature keeps rising.

Heat-related illness can range from mild conditions such as a rash or cramps to very serious conditions such as heat stroke, which can kill.

Overexertion in hot weather, sun or bushfire exposure, and exercising, working and living in hot, poorly ventilated or confined areas can increase your risk of heat stress. Heat can also make an existing medical condition worse, for example heart disease.

#### PEOPLE MOST AT RISK OF HEAT-RELATED ILLNESS

Anyone can suffer from heat-related illness, but those most at risk are:

- people over 65 years, particularly those living alone or without air-conditioning
- babies and young children
- pregnant and nursing mothers
- people who are physically unwell, especially with heart disease or high blood pressure
- people on medications for mental illness.

Elderly people are more prone to heat stress than younger people because their body may not adjust well to a sudden temperature change. They are also more likely to have a chronic medical condition and be taking medication that may interfere with the body's ability to regulate temperature.

#### CAUSES OF HEAT STRESS

There are many factors that can cause heat stress and heat-related illness. During an extended power outage two of these causes include dehydration and lack of airflow.

- **Dehydration** – to keep healthy, our body temperature needs to stay around 37°C. The body cools itself by sweating, which normally accounts for 70 to 80 per cent of the body's heat loss. If a person becomes dehydrated, they don't sweat as much and their body temperature keeps rising.
- **Lack of airflow** – working and living in hot, poorly ventilated or confined areas.

#### SYMPTOMS OF HEAT STRESS

It is important to know the signs and symptoms of heat exposure and how you should respond. Symptoms vary according to the type of heat-related illness. Babies and young children may show signs of restlessness or irritability and have fewer wet nappies. Older people may become light-headed, confused, weak or faint.

Some heat-related illness and common symptoms include:

- Heat rash
- Heat cramps
- Dizziness and fainting
- Heat exhaustion
- Heat stroke

### PREVENTION OF HEAT STRESS

Prevention is the best way to manage heat-related illness.

Some tips to prevent heat stress include:

- **Keep up your fluids** – you need to drink plenty of water during hot weather. Do not wait until you are thirsty to drink. Drink plenty of water or other cool, non-alcoholic fluids. (Check with your doctor if you are on limited fluids or fluid pills.) Avoid alcohol or drinks that contain lots of sugar. Don't have extremely cold liquids, as they may cause stomach cramps.
- **Avoid exposure to heat** – stay out of the sun as much as you can.
- **Limit physical activity** – too much physical activity on a hot day can lead to heat stress. If you can, restrict activity to cooler parts of the day.
- **Take it easy** – rest often and, whenever possible, stay indoors in a cool place or in the shade.
- **Stay cool** – and keep air circulating around you. Use air-conditioning if possible. Swim or take a cool shower, bath or sponge bath or visit/stay with friends and relatives that have air-conditioning or good airflow.
- **Keep up your energy levels** – eat regular, light meals.
- **Watch out for others** – check on older, sick or frail people who may need help coping with the heat (at least twice a day).
- **Seek medical assistance** if a person shows any signs of heat exhaustion or heat stroke.

### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Business hours: Contact the Environmental Health hotline on 1800 095 646

After hours: Contact the Power and Water Corporation hotline on 1800 245 090