

Killed by cold: Heart and stroke deaths peak in winter

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Rates of cardiovascular disease increase dramatically in Australian winters because many people don't know how to rug up against the cold, a Queensland University of Technology seasonal researcher has found.

Dr Adrian Barnett from QUT's IHBI (Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation) said the numbers showed that winters in Australia posed a greater risk to health than winters in cold northern European countries such as Finland and Sweden.

"Preventing heart-related deaths in the next few months could be as simple as putting on a hat and gloves because the peak season for cardiovascular deaths is upon us," Dr Barnett said.

"When the temperature goes below 19 degrees in Australia the [death](#) rate from heart and circulatory problems goes up.

"We are not very good at protecting ourselves against the [cold weather](#), we don't wear the right sort of clothes in [winter](#) and are homes are often not well insulated.

"Exposure to the cold raises blood pressure because the veins and arteries constrict, which puts extra stress on the heart and [circulatory system](#) that can be a real problem for people with some atherosclerosis.

"Elderly people are particularly at risk because they are frailer, their perception of temperature fades and they do not register cold as much."

Dr Barnett said Australians knew how to cope with heat, but in winter people just didn't know how to get warm enough.

"We can easily cope with 30 degrees, which people in northern Europe cannot do, but we are very fragile creatures when the temperature drops, even if it is only around 15 degrees," he said.

"Perth and Sydney lead the country in winter heart-related deaths and Tasmanians cope best with the cold because they are acclimatised to cooler weather.

"Darwin is not too bad because it doesn't get so cold."

Dr Barnett said putting on thermals, hats, gloves and slippers was more effective than heaters.

"Indoor heaters are not the answer, people tend to heat just one room and when they move to other rooms they get cold," he said.

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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