

Hundreds die from extreme heat each summer, CDC warns

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Photo: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Simple measures can help shield you and those you love, experts say.

(HealthDay)—It's only early June, but already soaring temperatures have hit some parts of the United States. So government health officials are reminding the public that while hundreds die from heat exposure each summer, there are way to minimize the risk.

"No one should die from a [heat wave](#), but every year on average, extreme heat causes 658 deaths in the United States—more than tornadoes, hurricanes, floods and lightning combined," Dr. Robin Ikeda, acting director of the National Center for Environmental Health at the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), said in an agency news release.

A new report released from the CDC found that there were more than 7,200 heat-related deaths in the United States between 1999 and 2009.

Those most at risk included seniors, children, the poor and people with pre-existing medical conditions.

One "extreme heat event"—with maximum temperatures topping 100 degrees—lasted for two weeks last July and centered on Maryland, Ohio, Virginia and West Virginia. That event alone claimed 32 lives, the CDC said.

Storms can play a major role in heat-related deaths as well, the agency noted. Immediately before the arrival of the extreme heat in the July event, intense thunderstorms with [high winds](#) caused widespread damage and [power outages](#), leaving many without air conditioning.

In 22 percent of the deaths, loss of power from the storms was known to be a contributing factor, the report found.

The [median age](#) of the people who died was 65 and more than two-thirds died at home. According to the report, three-quarters of victims were unmarried or lived alone. Many had underlying [health issues](#) such as [heart disease](#) and chronic respiratory disease.

There was one bright spot in the report: Fewer deaths were reported last year than in previous extreme heat events. That's likely due to measures taken by local and state agencies, according to the report published in the June 6 issue of the CDC journal *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.

Experts said there are key steps everyone can take to minimize their risk.

One essential step: Check up on elderly or ill relatives living on their own.

"Due to various reasons, the elderly are prone to suffer from the extreme heat," noted Dr. Salvatore Pardo, associate chairman of the emergency department at Long Island Jewish Medical Center in New Hyde Park, N.Y.

"It is vital for loved ones and friendly neighbors to enter the home and make sure they have functioning air conditioning or access to a cool environment—for example, a cooling center, senior center, public shopping mall—during extreme heat events," he said. "This should be done at the beginning, during, and after the [extreme heat](#) event."

Dr. Michael Ammazzalorso, chief medical officer at Winthrop-University Hospital in Mineola, N.Y., offered up other potentially lifesaving tips.

Keeping the shades drawn in the daytime can keep homes cooler, he said, and "if you live in a split-level home, stay downstairs. Heat rises so upstairs will always be hotter than your living room. Open windows upstairs if you have no air conditioning to keep the room cool and have a fan blowing."

Alcoholic beverages dehydrate, so stick to water or beverages without alcohol, lots of sugar or caffeine, Ammazzalorso said. Wear light, light-colored and loose clothing to stay cooler.

"Let the children play outside in the early morning or early evening when the air quality is at a healthier level and the temperatures are cooler," he added. "Head to a local swimming pool or beach to cool off, but never swim alone and be sure to observe all posted swimming advisories."

According to Ammazzalorso, signs of heat exhaustion include skin that is cool, moist and pale but may look flushed at times. Dizziness or fainting, nausea or vomiting, fatigue and headache are also potential

signs of heat exhaustion.

Signs of an even more serious condition known as heat stroke include red, hot and dry skin, high body temperatures (105 degrees or above), a rapid and weak pulse, rapid and shallow breathing, and changes in consciousness. In these cases, 911 should be dialed immediately, Ammazalorso said.

More information: The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency has more about [extreme heat](#).

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