

# Risk of heat-related health problems increases with age

July 12 2016, by Kim Calvin

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Summer is here and it's blazing hot! It is important to be aware of the health risks that higher temperatures can bring. Older adults and people with chronic medical conditions are particularly susceptible to hyperthermia and other heat-related illnesses. Knowing the signs and recognizing the dangers to avoid problems is essential. The National Institute on Aging (NIA), part of the National Institutes of Health, offers advice to help combat the dangers of hot weather.

Heat fatigue, [heat](#) syncope (sudden dizziness after prolonged exposure to the heat), heat cramps, heat exhaustion and [heat stroke](#) are forms of hyperthermia, which is caused by a failure of the body's heat-regulating mechanisms to deal with a hot environment. The combination of individual lifestyle, general health, and high temperatures can increase [older adults'](#) risk for heat-related problems.

Lifestyle factors can include not drinking enough fluids, living in housing without [air conditioning](#), lack of mobility and access to transportation, overdressing, visiting overcrowded places and not understanding how to respond to [hot weather](#) conditions. On hot and humid days, older people, particularly those with [chronic medical conditions](#) like heart disease and diabetes, should stay indoors in cooler spaces, especially during an air pollution alert. People without air conditioners should go to places that do have air conditioning, such as senior centers, shopping malls, movie theaters and libraries. Cooling centers, which may be set up by local public health agencies, religious groups and social service organizations in many communities, are

another option.

There are many things that can increase risk for hyperthermia, including:

- Dehydration
- Age-related changes to the skin such as [poor blood circulation](#) and inefficient sweat production
- Use of multiple medications-it is important, however, to continue to take prescribed medication and discuss possible problems with a physician.
- Reduced sweating caused by medications such as diuretics, sedatives, tranquilizers and certain heart and blood pressure drugs
- High blood pressure or other health conditions that require changes in diet- people on salt-restricted diets may be at increased risk, however, salt pills should not be used without first consulting a doctor.
- Heart, lung and kidney diseases, as well as any illness that causes general weakness or fever
- Being substantially overweight or underweight
- Alcohol use

Heat stroke is a life-threatening form of hyperthermia. It occurs when the body is overwhelmed by heat and unable to control its temperature. Signs and symptoms of heat stroke include a significant increase in body temperature (generally above 104 degrees Fahrenheit), mental status changes (like confusion or combativeness), strong rapid pulse, dry flushed skin, lack of sweating, feeling faint, staggering or coma. It is critical to seek immediate emergency medical attention for a person with heat stroke symptoms, especially an older adult.

If you suspect that someone is suffering from a heat-related illness:

- Call 911 if you suspect heat stroke.
- Get the person out of the heat and into a shady, air-conditioned or other cool place. Urge them to lie down.
- Apply a cold, wet cloth to the wrists, neck, armpits, and groin. These are places where blood passes close to the surface of the skin, and the cold cloths can help cool the blood.
- If the person can swallow safely, offer fluids such as water, fruit and vegetable juices, but avoid alcohol and caffeine.
- Encourage the individual to shower, bathe or sponge off with cool water if it is safe to do so.

**More information:** The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services helps eligible households pay for home cooling and heating costs. People interested in applying for assistance should contact their local or state LIHEAP agency or go to <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/liheap>.

For a free copy of the NIA's Age Page on hyperthermia in [English](#) or in [Spanish](#), contact the NIA Information Center at 1-800-222-2225 or go to <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/agepages>.

Provided by National Institutes of Health

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