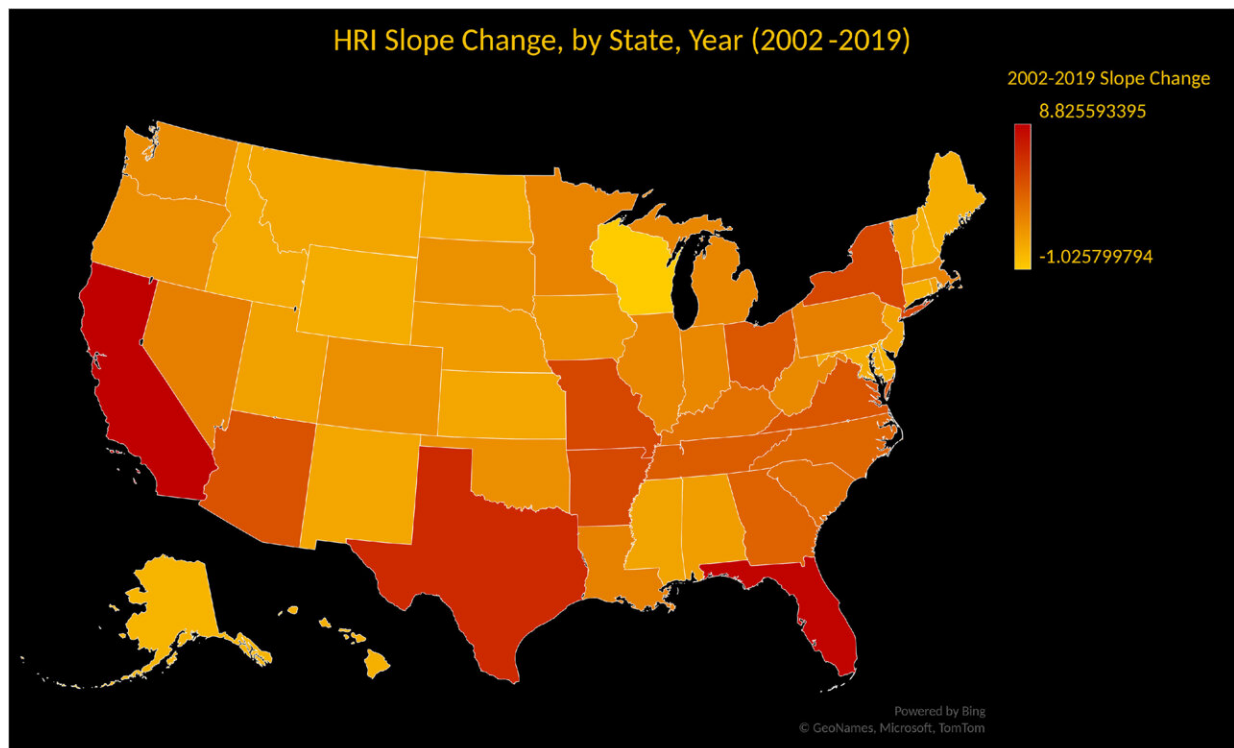


# Heat related illnesses dramatically on the rise among US Veterans

August 22 2023



Color corresponds with slope change of heat related illness (HRI) diagnoses over our assessment period (red=larger positive slope, followed by orange, and the least slope change in yellow). Credit: *The Journal of Climate Change and Health*

Researchers report a statistically significant and clinically important increase in heat related illnesses among patients at US Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) health facilities across the United States between

2002 and 2019. The study, which appears in *The Journal of Climate Change and Health*, documents far-reaching negative consequences of extreme-weather.

Lead investigator Thomas F. Osborne, MD, VA Palo Alto Healthcare System and Stanford University School of Medicine, commented, "Our goal is to provide the best care for our patients, and understanding health risk is critical to our mission. Our team has incredible analytics staff, which, combined with expertise from partners at the CDC, has empowered us to uncover important insights."

"The data are a call to action as they expose a steady increase in the incidence of severe [heat](#) related illnesses in our US Veteran patient population. Although no one is immune from this danger, those who are traditionally the most vulnerable face the greatest risk of heat related illnesses."

Not surprisingly, the study found that specific groups of patients, such as those with existing [health conditions](#) and within specific ethnic groups, experienced higher rates of heat related [illness](#).

Co-investigator Zachary Veigulis, MS, US Department of Veterans Affairs, Palo Alto Healthcare System, and Department of Business Analytics, Tippie College of Business, University of Iowa, noted, "The extensive electronic health records from the VA, the US's largest healthcare system, made it possible to understand the scope and scale of the growing danger and predict and identify individuals at greatest risk so we can target interventions."

While every state had residents that suffered heat related illnesses during the study period, the state-by-state numbers did not mirror geographic climate trends, possibly because the traditionally warmer states had already adopted policies, procedures, and practices to mitigate the health

consequences of environmental heat.

Another finding that suggested interventions reduce the growing health risk was the declining rate of heat related illness for homeless US Veterans in the second half of the study's timeframe, a period after the launch and expansion of additional VA homeless health and wellness programs.

Dr. Osborne added, "This assessment represents a critical first step in understanding the challenge, which is required to inform optimal care and prevention strategies. However, there is much more work to be done. While the physical impact of environmental heat is critically important, it is only one of many climate-related health dangers."

"Climate change-related health risks such as the unprecedented spread of infectious disease, wildfires, migration, infrastructure damage, as well as food and water insecurity are now central issues of our time. Urgent collaborative action is required to avoid additional suffering."

**More information:** Thomas F. Osborne et al, Trends in heat related illness: Nationwide observational cohort at the US department of veteran affairs, *The Journal of Climate Change and Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.joclim.2023.100256](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joclim.2023.100256)

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