

Live Well,
Work Well



Extreme Heat Wellness Tips



Summers in the United States are becoming longer and more intense, and public health data reflects that shift. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 700 people die from extreme heat each year in the United States. The National Weather Service (NWS) has identified heat as the leading weather-related cause of death nationally, surpassing the combined toll of hurricanes, tornadoes and floods. As these trends continue, understanding how to prepare for and respond to extreme heat has become an important part of seasonal health and safety planning.

This article breaks down what counts as extreme heat, the health risks it poses and practical steps you can take to stay safe when the temperature rises.

What Is Extreme Heat?

Extreme heat isn't just a hot day; it's a specific, dangerous weather pattern. Meteorologists and public health agencies generally define it as a period of unusually high temperatures, often accompanied by high humidity, that lasts for an extended period and significantly exceeds what's normal for a given region and season.

The NWS typically classifies heat as extreme when the heat index climbs above 105 degrees Fahrenheit (40.5 degrees Celsius). A heat wave is generally defined as two or more consecutive days of abnormally and uncomfortably hot weather that falls outside the historical average for that specific location. Importantly, what counts as extreme is relative. For example, 95 degrees Fahrenheit might be unremarkable in Phoenix but could be a genuine health emergency in Seattle, where infrastructure and acclimatization to heat are far less common.

Extreme heat events are also increasingly referred to as heat domes when a large area of high pressure traps hot air over a region for days or weeks, intensifying and prolonging dangerous conditions. These events have become more frequent, longer lasting and more intense in recent decades, which is why understanding the risks matters more than ever.

The Risks of Extreme Heat

Extreme heat affects the body in ways that can escalate quickly, sometimes within just a few hours of exposure. Exposure to extreme heat can lead to the following health risks:

- **Heat exhaustion and heatstroke**—When the body can't cool itself fast enough through sweating, its core temperature begins to climb uncontrollably. Heat exhaustion, marked by heavy sweating, weakness, dizziness and nausea, can progress rapidly to heatstroke, a life-threatening condition in which the body fails to regulate its temperature. Heatstroke can cause lasting damage to the brain, heart, kidneys, and other organs, and requires emergency medical attention.
- **Cardiovascular and respiratory strain**—Heat forces the heart to work harder as it pumps more blood to the skin's surface to release heat, which can be dangerous for people with existing heart conditions. Heat can also

worsen air quality by trapping pollutants, such as ozone and fine particulate matter near the ground, which can trigger asthma attacks and other respiratory complications.

- **Dehydration**—Excessive sweating without adequate fluid replacement can lead to dangerous dehydration, which strains the kidneys and can cause dizziness, confusion and fainting.

Tips for Staying Safe During Extreme Heat

While extreme heat poses serious risks, most heat-related illnesses are preventable with the right precautions. The following practical steps can help individuals and families reduce their risk and stay safe during periods of high heat:

- **Stay informed.** Pay attention to heat advisories and warnings from local weather services, and adjust your plans accordingly on high-risk days.
- **Plan ahead.** During seasons when extreme heat is a persistent or recurring threat, check weather forecasts a few days in advance so an approaching heat advisory doesn't catch you off guard. Staying ahead of the forecast makes it easier to reschedule outdoor activities, prepare your home and make smarter choices before conditions become dangerous.
- **Hydrate proactively, not reactively.** Don't wait until you're thirsty. Drink water consistently throughout the day, and consider electrolyte-replacement drinks if you're sweating heavily. Limit alcohol and caffeine, which can accelerate dehydration.
- **Time your activities wisely.** Reserve outdoor exercise, yard work or errands for the coolest parts of the day, early morning or evening, and avoid strenuous activity during peak afternoon heat.
- **Dress for the heat.** Lightweight, loose-fitting, light-colored clothing can help your body regulate temperature more effectively. A wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses add extra protection outdoors.
- **Keep your living space cool.** Use air conditioning when possible, and if you don't have access to it, spend time in public cooling centers, libraries or shopping malls during the hottest hours.
- **Look out for those most at risk.** Check in regularly with elderly neighbors, relatives and anyone with chronic health conditions. Never leave children or pets in parked vehicles; interior temperatures can spike to dangerous levels within minutes.
- **Know the warning signs.** Learn to recognize the symptoms of heat exhaustion (e.g., heavy sweating, weakness, headache, nausea) versus heatstroke (e.g., confusion, hot and dry or clammy skin, rapid pulse, loss of consciousness). Heatstroke is a medical emergency. Call for help immediately if heatstroke symptoms occur.
- **Cool your body directly.** Cool showers, damp cloths on the neck and wrists, and misting fans can help lower body temperature quickly when you're feeling overheated.

Conclusion

Extreme heat is no longer a rare, isolated event; it's an escalating public health threat that demands attention every summer. When left untreated, heat-related illnesses can become life-threatening. If heat-related symptoms don't improve within an hour, contact a doctor and seek immediate medical attention if the person has heatstroke.

Check local weather services for more information on heat advisories and severe weather.

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