

By Sara Ostrander

IT'S HOT – REALLY HOT

It's that time of the year when temperatures soar and gardening kicks into high gear! We are harvesting, preserving, and enjoying our vegetables and fruits. Or you might be chasing pest control options, deadheading, or picking flowers from your garden. Whatever the activity, we must be sensible about the upcoming hot weather! Take breaks, drink lots of fluids, wear a hat, use sunscreen, put on your sunglasses, avoid the highest heat hours from 11-2, dress in lightweight, light-colored clothing, and be aware of your body's signals! And NEVER leave children, pets, or vulnerable persons alone in a parked car!

Many of us tend to take the take the impact of increased temperature lightly. However, heat-related illness is a major public health concern in the US, with over 119,605 emergency room visits and thousands of hospitalizations annually. Over the span of two recent summers (2023–2024), over 4,800 heat-related deaths were recorded nationally, with a disproportionate number of cases concentrated in the American Southwest. Older adults (over 50), males, and individuals experiencing homelessness are the most severely impacted groups.

In many cases of heat stroke or exhaustion, patients suffered illness while indoors. For example, a large number of indoor heat-related fatalities occurred in residences that had an AC unit, but where the unit was non-functional or the resident did not turn it on. Check on elderly and vulnerable adults often.

Recognizing & Treating Heat Illness

Learn to distinguish between heat cramps, heat exhaustion and a life-threatening heat stroke:

- **Heat Cramps:** Heat Cramps are muscle spasms caused by a large loss of salt and water in the body. Symptoms include heavy sweating with muscle pain or spasms. Move to a cooler place, loosen clothing, and sip cool fluids. Seek medical attention if cramps last longer than 1 hour or person affected has heart problem.
- **Heat Exhaustion:** Symptoms include dizziness, headache, cold, pale and clammy skin, rapid pulse, weakness, and nausea. Move to a cooler place, loosen clothing, and sip cool fluids. Seek medical attention if symptoms last more than an hour, if vomiting occurs, or person affected has heart problem.
- **Heat Stroke:** Symptoms include slurred speech, high body temperature, nausea, abnormal behavior, confusion, dry skin, and seizures. **Call 9-1-1 immediately.** Move the person to the shade and actively cool their body with ice packs or cool, wet cloths on the head, neck, and armpits while waiting for medical help.

Preventative Actions & Hydration

- **Drink consistently:** Consume 1 cup of cool water every 15 to 20 minutes, even if you do not feel thirsty.
- **Avoid dehydrating fluids:** Steer clear of alcohol, high caffeine, and heavy sugar drinks.
- **Replenish electrolytes:** During intense or prolonged outdoor work, use sports drinks or electrolyte replacements.
- **Eat light:** Choose smaller, well-balanced meals rather than heavy, protein-dense foods that increase metabolic heat.

Outdoor & Work Pacing

- **Acclimatize:** If you are new to working in the heat, ease into it by using the **20% Rule:** work only 20% of the normal duration on day one, increasing by 20% each subsequent day.
- **Adjust your schedule:** Try to schedule strenuous physical activity or outdoor work for the coolest parts of the day, typically early morning or evening.
- **Take breaks:** Frequently stop to recover in a designated shady or cool area.
- **Dress appropriately:** Wear breathable, loose-fitting, light-colored clothing and a wide-brimmed hat.

Indoor & Environmental Controls

- **Seek air conditioning:** If you do not have an air conditioner at home, visit public spaces like libraries or malls.
- **Block the sun:** Cover windows that receive direct morning or afternoon sun with curtains, shades, or blinds.
- **Cool down naturally:** Take cool showers or baths and use electric fans only to circulate air (fans alone will not cool the body during dangerous heatwaves).
- **Never leave dependents in cars:** A parked vehicle's interior can reach dangerous, life-threatening temperatures in just a matter of minutes.

Additional Resources:

Red Cross: [Extreme Heat Safety - Red Cross](#)

Download the Red Cross Safety Check list: [Extreme Heat Safety Checklist](#)

Center for Disease Control: [Protect Yourself From the Dangers of Extreme Heat - CDC](#)

OSHA Heat Illness Prevention Campaign: <https://www.osha.gov/heat>

California Heat Illness Prevention Plan: <https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/etools/08-006/index.htm>

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