

American
Red Cross

Are You Ready for a Heat Wave?

Here's what you can do to prepare yourself and your family

Know what these terms mean

- ✓ **Heat wave:** Prolonged period of excessive heat and humidity. The National Weather Service steps up its procedures to alert the public during these periods of excessive heat and humidity.
- ✓ **Heat index:** A number in degrees Fahrenheit (F) that tells how hot it really feels when relative humidity is added to the actual air temperature. Exposure to full sunshine can increase the heat index by 15° F.
- ✓ **Heat cramps:** Heat cramps are muscular pains and spasms due to heavy exertion. Although heat cramps are the least severe, they are an early signal that the body is having trouble with the heat.
- ✓ **Heat exhaustion:** Heat exhaustion typically occurs when people exercise heavily or work in a hot, humid place where body fluids are lost through heavy sweating. Blood flow to the skin increases, causing blood flow to decrease to the vital organs. This results in a form of mild shock. If not treated, the victim may suffer heat stroke.
- ✓ **Heat stroke:** Heat stroke is life-threatening. The victim's temperature control system, which produces sweating to cool the body, stops working. The body temperature can rise so high that brain damage and death may result if the body is not cooled quickly.
- ✓ **Sunstroke:** Another term for heat stroke.

If a heat wave is predicted or happening—

- ✓ Slow down. Avoid strenuous activity. If you must do strenuous activity, do it during the coolest part of the day, which is usually in the morning between 4:00 a.m. and 7:00 a.m.

- ✓ Stay indoors as much as possible. If air conditioning is not available, stay on the lowest floor, out of the sunshine. Try to go to a public building with air conditioning each day for several hours. Remember, electric fans do not cool the air, but they do help sweat evaporate, which cools your body.
- ✓ Wear lightweight, light-colored clothing. Light colors will reflect away some of the sun's energy.
- ✓ Drink plenty of water regularly and often. Your body needs water to keep cool.
- ✓ Drink plenty of fluids even if you do not feel thirsty.
- ✓ Water is the safest liquid to drink during heat emergencies. Avoid drinks with alcohol or caffeine in them. They can make you feel good briefly, but make the heat's effects on your body worse. This is especially true about beer, which dehydrates the body.
- ✓ Eat small meals and eat more often. Avoid foods that are high in protein, which increase metabolic heat.
- ✓ Avoid using salt tablets unless directed to do so by a physician.

Signals of heat emergencies

- ✓ **Heat exhaustion:** Cool, moist, pale, or flushed skin; heavy sweating; headache; nausea or vomiting; dizziness; and exhaustion. Body temperature will be near normal.
- ✓ **Heat stroke:** Hot, red skin; changes in consciousness; rapid, weak pulse; and rapid, shallow breathing. Body temperature can be very high—as high as 105° F. If the person was sweating from heavy work or exercise, skin may be wet; otherwise, it will feel dry.

Treatment of heat emergencies

- ✓ **Heat cramps:** Get the person to a cooler place and have him or her rest in a comfortable position. Lightly stretch the affected muscle and replenish fluids. Give a half glass of cool water every 15 minutes. Do not give liquids with alcohol or caffeine in them, as they can make conditions worse.
- ✓ **Heat exhaustion:** Get the person out of the heat and into a cooler place. Remove or loosen tight clothing and apply cool, wet cloths, such as towels or sheets. If the person is conscious, give cool water to drink. Make sure the person drinks slowly. Give a half glass of cool water every 15 minutes. Do not give liquids that contain alcohol or caffeine. Let the victim rest in a comfortable position, and watch carefully for changes in his or her condition.
- ✓ **Heat stroke:** Heat stroke is a life-threatening situation. Help is needed fast. Call 9-1-1 or your local emergency number. Move the person to a cooler place. Quickly cool the body. Immerse victim in a cool bath, or wrap wet sheets around the body and fan it. Watch for signals of breathing problems. Keep the person lying down and continue to cool the body any way you can. If the victim refuses water or is vomiting or there are changes in the level of consciousness, do not give anything to eat or drink.

Your local contact is:

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Heat can affect anyone. However, it is more likely to affect young children, elderly people, and people with health problems. For instance, people with a medical condition that causes poor blood circulation, and those who take medications to get rid of water from the body (diuretics) or for certain skin conditions, may be more susceptible. Consult with a physician if you have any questions about how your medication may affect your ability to tolerate heat.

Be prepared for heat emergencies by having various members of the family do the activities on the checklist below. Then get together to discuss and finalize your Family Disaster Plan.

_____ **Discuss what each member of the family would do during a heat wave. Where are the safest and coolest places to be at home? . . . at work? . . . at school? . . . and in other places where you may go?**

Coolest place at home: _____

_____ **If your home does not have air conditioning, choose other places you go to get relief from the heat during the warmest part of the day.**

Cool places to go to avoid heat: _____

_____ **Plan changes in your daily activities that would be needed to avoid strenuous work during the warmest part of the day.**

Changes to daily activities: _____

_____ **Plan to wear lightweight, light-colored clothing.**

Clothing choices: _____

_____ **Some family members may be taking medications or have medical conditions that may cause poor blood circulation or reduced ability to tolerate heat. Discuss these concerns with a physician.**

Physician's special recommendations: _____

_____ **Take an American Red Cross first aid course to learn how to treat heat emergencies and other emergencies.**

Household member(s) trained in first aid: _____

Certifications good through: _____

(date)

And remember . . . when a heat wave, thunderstorm, tornado, earthquake, flood, fire, or other emergency happens in your community, you can count on your local American Red Cross chapter to be there to help you and your family. Your Red Cross is not a government agency and depends on contributions of your time, money, and blood.

For more information, contact your local Red Cross chapter, National Weather Service office, or emergency management agency. You can also visit these Web sites:

American Red Cross: **www.redcross.org**

National Weather Service: **www.nws.noaa.gov**

Federal Emergency Management Agency: **www.fema.gov**