



HOT WEATHER SAFETY FOR OLDER ADULTS

This note applies to older people in general but people living with dementia are especially vulnerable in hot weather.

Too much heat is not safe for anyone. The South African climate is one of the sunniest in the world but it can be a health risk. The risk is even greater if you are older and/or have health problems. It is important to get relief from heat quickly. If not, you might begin feeling confused or faint. Your heart might become stressed and even stop beating.

Being hot for too long can cause several illnesses, all termed hyperthermia. Some of them to watch out for are:

- **Heat Syncope.** This is a sudden dizziness that can happen if you are active in hot weather (such as playing a sport). If you take a heart medication called a beta blocker or are not used to the heat, you are more likely to feel faint. Rest in a cool place with your legs up and drink water to make the dizziness go away.
- **Heat Cramps.** These are the painful tightening of muscles, often in the stomach, arms or legs. This problem can occur when you are doing hard work using your muscles or through exercise. Your body temperature and pulse might be normal during heat cramps but your skin may feel moist or cool. Find a way to cool down by resting in the shade or in a cool building. Drink plenty of fluids but avoid alcohol and caffeine drinks
- **Heat Edema** is a swelling in your ankles and feet when you get hot. Put your legs up to help reduce the swelling. If that does not seem to be working fairly quickly consult a doctor.
- **Heat Exhaustion** is a warning that your body can no longer keep itself cool. You might feel unusually thirsty, dizzy, weak, uncoordinated and nauseated. You may sweat a lot. Your body temperature may be normal but your skin might feel cold and clammy. In some cases, you may have a more rapid pulse than normal. Rest in a cool place and take plenty of fluids. If the condition does not improve quickly, get medical care. Be careful as heat exhaustion may become heat stroke.

Heat Stroke – A Medical Emergency

If you have heat stroke, you need medical help straight away. Older people living in places without air conditioning or fans are most at risk. People who become dehydrated or have chronic diseases or alcoholism are also at most risk. Signs of heat stroke are:

- Fainting (perhaps the first sign) or becoming unconscious



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- A change in behaviour such as confusion, agitation, staggering, being grouchy or otherwise acting strangely.
 - A high temperature (over 104F or 40C)
 - Dry, flushed skin and a strong, rapid pulse or a slow weak pulse
 - Not sweating even if it is hot.

Who is at risk?

Most people who die from hyperthermia are over 50 years old. Some health problems which put people most at risk are:

- Heart or blood pressure problems
- Poorly working sweat glands or changes in your skin through normal ageing
- Heart, lung or kidney disease as well as any illness that makes you feel weak all over or makes you feverish
- Conditions treated by drugs such as diuretics, sedatives, tranquillizers and some heart and blood pressure medications as they may make it harder for the body to cool itself.
- Ask your doctor for advice on medication more likely to result in you becoming over heated
- Being overweight or underweight.
- Drinking alcoholic drinks.

How can I lower my risk?

Things you can do:

- Drink plenty of liquids, such as water or fruit or vegetable juices. Stay away from drinks containing alcohol or caffeine. If your doctor has said you must limit your liquids for some reason, ask what to do when it is very hot.
- If where you live you have no air conditioning or fans, try to keep the house as cool as possible. For example, limit use of the cooker and keep your shades, curtains or blinds closed during the hottest part of the day. If you open windows at night to lower the heat ensure that it is safe to do so
- If your house is hot, it may be possible to spend part of the day at shops or somewhere where there is air conditioning



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- If you need help in getting to a cool place, ask a friend or relative. Avoid standing outside waiting for a bus or other form of public transport.
 - Dress for the weather. Some people find fabrics such as cotton to be cooler than more synthetic fibres
 - Do not try to exercise or do a lot of activity outside when it is hot
 - Avoid crowded places when it is hot outside. Make trips during non – rush hour times.

Weather reports

Check weather reports for temperature and humidity or air pollution (if given in the reports you can access). Be safe by checking before you go outside.

What should I remember?

Older people can struggle to deal with heat and humidity. The outside temperature does not need to reach 100F or 38C to put them at risk for a heat ps:seriously. In such cases a doctor should be consulted.

To prevent heart related illnesses from becoming a heat stroke, remember to:

- Get out of the house and into a cool place – with air conditioning if possible
- Drink fluids but not alcohol or caffeine. Water or fruit or vegetables jukes are better
- Shower or bathe with cool water
- Lie down and rest in a cool place
- Go to your doctor or another health facility if you still cannot cool down.