

Managing health impacts of a heatwave for frail older people and younger people with disabilities in the community

As you are aware we are currently experiencing a prolonged period of very hot weather across Victoria. This has the potential to have significant health impacts on vulnerable people in the community because of the effect of extended exposure to high temperatures, possible power outages on food safety and smoke from bushfires. I am sure you already have contingency plans in place to deal with these issues. This information is provided to support and complement your activities in managing these issues.

The following practical advice can help to prevent heat-related illnesses:

- Check on older, sick and frail people who may need help coping with the heat.
- Never leave anyone in a closed parked car;
- Drink plenty of water and fluids (non-alcoholic) (Note: If your doctor normally limits your fluids or you are on fluid tablets, you may need to check how much to drink while the weather is hot);
- Limit or avoid alcoholic drinks
- Stay indoors, if possible in air-conditioning, or in the shade;
- Take a cool shower or bath;
- Wear lightweight, loose-fitting clothing;
- Reduce physical activity;
- Don't rely on fans unless there is adequate ventilation;
- Know the signs and symptoms of excessive heat exposure and know how to respond; and

The body normally sweats to cool down but sometimes sweating isn't enough and rising body temperature can lead to heat stress.

Effects of heat-related illnesses can range from mild conditions such as a rash or cramps to very serious conditions such as heat stroke - which can kill. Heat may worsen the condition of someone who already has a medical condition such as heart disease.

Those most at risk are people over 65 years, particularly those living alone without air conditioning, infants, pregnant women and nursing mothers, people who are unwell, especially with heart disease or high blood pressure and people on medications for mental illness.

Evidence has shown that excess mortality amongst the elderly population occurs when extremely hot days are followed by high overnight temperatures.

Elderly people are more prone to heat stress than younger people because their body may not adjust well to sudden temperature change. They are more likely to have a chronic medical condition and to be taking medication that may interfere with the body's ability to regulate temperature.

If you have particular concerns about people in your community you can contact Nurse On Call. NURSE-ON-CALL is a telephone health line, providing Victorians with immediate, expert health information and advice 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The number is 1300 606024 for the cost of a local call anywhere in Victoria.

The following links are to the various suites of information available via the Departments websites which may be of use given the potential issues faced with hot weather, power loss, food safety and bushfire:

Managing Heat Stress -

http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/emergency_mgmnt/heat_stress.htm

Food Safety during Power outages -

http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/emergency_mgmnt/food_safety.htm

Living without Power -

http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/emergency_mgmnt/power_blackouts.htm

Bushfire smoke and your Health -

http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/emergency_mgmnt/bushfire_smoke.htm

There is also information linked from the DHS homepage -

http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/emergency/current_events/heatwave

as well as that available through the Better Health Channel - <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au> click the link under the 'Features' banner marked Hot weather

For your information under the Victorian Heatwave Strategy the following councils have undertaken a pilot planning process to develop responses to heatwaves.

- City Greater Bendigo (Loddon Mallee Region)
- Baw Baw Shire Council (Gippsland Region)
- Hobsons Bay City Council (North and West Metro Region)
- Whitehorse City Council (Eastern Metro Region)
- Latrobe City Council (Gippsland Region)
- Hume City Council (North and West Metro Region)
- City of Yarra (North and West Metro Region)
- City of Melbourne (North and West Metro Region)
- City Wodonga (Hume Region)
- City of Port Phillip* (Southern Metro Region)
- City of Stonnington* (Southern Metro Region)
- Wimmera PCP (Grampians Region) involving:
 - West Wimmera Shire Council
 - Horsham Rural City Council
 - Yarriambiack Shire Council
 - Hindmarsh Shire Council
- Western Port Greenhouse Alliance (Southern Metro Region) involving
 - Bass Coast Shire Council
 - Cardinia Shire Council
 - City of Casey
 - Frankston City Council
 - Mornington Peninsula Shire Council
- Southern Grampians and Glenelg PCP (Barwon Region) involving
 - Glenelg Shire
 - Southern Grampians Shire

All these have a heatwave plan or are in the process of finalising a plan. The Southern Grampians and Glenelg PCP is still underway.

A typical heatwave plan has a staged approach, ranging from pre-heatwave season to the deactivation of the heatwave response plan. Some actions identified by the pilots include:

- Development and implementation of a communication strategy
- Identifying roles and responsibilities for services within Council
- Identifying those at risk in the community receiving services from the Council
- Providing education to clients receiving services from Council
- Providing education to council staff delivering services to vulnerable groups
- Identifying and promoting cool areas
- Identifying relief centres for prolonged heatwave
- Liaising with relevant personnel and agencies
- Training of staff providing care

Aged Care Branch
Department of Human Services
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