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| Addendum to the *Heat health plan for Victoria* |
| 1 December 2021 |
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# Background

Extreme heat is one of the most significant natural hazards facing Victorians.

Victoria experienced first-hand the impact of extreme heat in 2009 and 2014 when 374 and 167 excess deaths occurred respectively[[1]](#footnote-2).

There are a number of effective actions that can reduce the significant impact of extreme heat. Promoting these actions and supporting the health and wellbeing of Victorians is a responsibility shared by all Victorians, service providers, community organisations, local governments and state government departments.

The *Heat health plan for Victoria[[2]](#footnote-3)* outlines how the Department of Health (‘the department’), together with local government and the health sector, will plan, prepare and respond to extreme heat and heatwave.

For the 2021-22 summer, there may be further considerations or adaptations of these arrangements in light of coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance and restrictions. The situation with coronavirus (COVID-19) may have changed since the drafting of this document. For the latest guidance and restrictions, please visit <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>.

# Purpose

This addendum aims to highlight further considerations and adaptations for extreme heat planning and response in light of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, to protect those most at risk. It should be read in conjunction with the *Heat health plan for Victoria* and the current coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions*.*

# Health impacts of extreme heat and heatwave

Exposure to extreme heat and heatwave can result in a range of mild to severe health impacts, including:

* heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke
* dehydration
* exacerbation of pre-existing medical conditions, including heart (cardiac) and kidney (renal) disease, asthma and other respiratory illnesses
* gastroenteritis where food is not properly stored at cold temperatures resulting in excessive growth of disease-causing bacteria.

Anyone can be affected by extreme heat and heatwave. However, some people are more at risk than others and may include people:

* of a certain age or life stage, for example those over 65 years old
* with particular social or economic circumstances like those living alone or who are socially isolated
* experiencing health conditions such as heart and lung disease
* taking medications that may affect how the body reacts to heat
* who are active outdoors.

# Potential risks due to coronavirus (COVID-19)

## Individual risks

There is some commonality in those who are likely to be most affected by extreme heat and heatwave and those most at risk of serious illness from coronavirus (COVID-19).

Protective actions are critical to reduce the impact of extreme heat and heatwave, as described in the *Heat Health Plan for Victoria*.

For specific information about at-risk groups and protective actions for coronavirus (COVID-19), please refer to <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/clinical-guidance-and-resources-covid-19>.

## Environmental risks

Under certain restrictions, Victorians may be required to limit travel outside the home. For the latest coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions, refer to <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/victorias-restriction-levels-covid-19>.

Some people may be required to isolate or quarantine at home, for example those who:

* have symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19)
* have tested positive to coronavirus (COVID-19)
* have been in close contact with someone who has coronavirus (COVID-19)
* live in the same household as someone with coronavirus (COVID-19).

Those who are more vulnerable to coronavirus (COVID-19) may choose to stay at home to reduce their risk of exposure, but may increase their risk from indoor overheating.

Remaining indoors in home isolation or quarantine during extreme heat and heatwave without cooling strategies may increase the risk from indoor overheating. People remaining in an unairconditioned home will be unable to benefit from a temporary break in a cool space such as a shopping centre, library, cinema, public swimming pool, or a friend’s home with air conditioning.

An associated limit on visits from family or friends due to coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions make supporting vulnerable people more difficult. Protective measures such as phone calls and virtual visits from carers and service providers and early planning about how they will stay cool at home, may reduce their risk from indoor overheating.

Surviving the heat at home may require consideration of access and affordability of air conditioning and power, as well as cooling strategies that do not require power. Alternative cooling strategies include cool showers, using a fan with a misting spray, putting feet in a bucket of cool water or placing cool, wet face washers around the neck.

Others may be working from home to help reduce the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) or because they are more vulnerable to infection. Depending on the coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions[[3]](#footnote-4), these people may find respite from extreme heat outside the home, either outdoors in a shaded area or in an alternative, cooler location. Planning should consider how coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions will impact the ability to provide and access these locations and how these impacts will be communicated with others.

## Other risks

Face masks may be required in some settings depending on the level of coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions. However, wearing a face mask in extreme heat or heatwave may increase the risk of heat-related illness due to reduced heat loss.

There are lawful exceptions for not wearing a face mask (https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/face-masks-vic-covid-19) including existing medical conditions or in an emergency, such as someone experiencing heat stroke.

For tips on how to reduce risk of heat-related illness, refer to <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/environmental-health/climate-weather-and-public-health/heatwaves-and-extreme-heat/heatwave-community-resources>.

# Further considerations for extreme heat due to coronavirus (COVID-19)

The *Heat Health Plan for Victoria* sets out actions for the department (Table 2), local government (Table 3), health and community service providers (Table 4) and health services (Table 5). These actions remain critical to reducing harm from extreme heat and heatwave.

Extreme heat or heatwave can occur during a pandemic, presenting challenges for organisations and individuals planning, preparing and responding to extreme heat depending on the phase of the pandemic and associated public health control strategies.

Extreme heat preparedness and response actions will need to be adaptable and capable of managing throughout a spectrum of more stringent to less stringent public health control measures.

## General considerations

* Stay up-to-date with the latest coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions, guidance and directions at <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>.
* Physical distancing and good personal hygiene should be maintained.
* Pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals can transmit the virus.
* Not all people will have access to a smart-phone or mobile phone.
* Although an overwhelming percentage of the Victorian population is now vaccinated against coronavirus (COVID-19), there are some people who cannot be vaccinated.
* Planning for additional power shortages due to more people staying and working at home is critical.

## Planning for extreme heat in the COVID-19 pandemic

* Review and update all relevant extreme heat plans to incorporate how your organisation will manage client, patient, staff and visitor risk of extreme heat with consideration of the coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance, restrictions and directions. This may be supported by creating a tiered approach that considers various scenarios, steps/stages and restrictions.
* Work with partner agencies and providers to raise awareness about the concurrent risk of extreme heat and coronavirus (COVID-19) and how you will adapt your extreme heat planning, preparedness and response activities accordingly.
* Review who may be at increased risk from indoor overheating because they have been told to self-isolate or quarantine at home, including staff, clients, patients and carers.
* Consider the risk of power outages for your staff, clients, patients and visitors in contingency planning, including accessing air conditioning, information or records, phone or video calls to clients and storage of medication.
* Undertake a risk assessment when establishing cool spaces or other alternative arrangements for clients, patients, visitors and the public that considers both the risk of extreme heat and coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance, restrictions and directions. This may be supported by creating a tiered approach that considers various scenarios, steps/stages and restrictions.
* Establish how those most at risk will be contacted prior to an extreme heat event or heatwave (i.e. over the phone), particularly those asked to remain at home due to individual risk (see above).
* Review and update the communication and engagement strategy to consider the communication messaging and material, engagement with stakeholders and means of communicating changes to planning due to coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance and restrictions. Remember to ensure people are aware that in an emergency, you are allowed to leave home, even under the most stringent restrictions.
* Engage the community and voluntary sector to support communities to help those most at risk, especially those who are socially isolated.

## Cool spaces considerations during the COVID-19 pandemic

In addition to the general considerations above, there may be further considerations such as:

* Coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance and restrictions may impact the ability of organisations to open and manage public cool spaces either because they are closed or have capacity limits.
* Visitors may be asked to sign in using a QR code and provide proof of vaccination before entering, depending on the level of restrictions. There may need to be manual processes to support those who do not have a mobile phone.

## Possible actions for extreme heat and coronavirus (COVID-19)

* Update individual heat health plans for clients and vulnerable-client lists with consideration of coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance, restrictions and directions (<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>).
* Inform staff engaging with the public of any changes to your organisation’s response activities that may be impacted by coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance, restrictions and directions.
* Communicate heat health messages to staff, clients, patients and the community in a timely and strategic way to improve reach and effect behaviour.
* Contact those most at risk prior to extreme heat and heatwave to provide heat health messages, as well as identify their risk from indoor overheating and strategies for keeping cool.
* Encourage partners, stakeholders, clients, patients, families and carers to subscribe to heat health alerts at <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/environmental-health/climate-weather-and-public-health/heatwaves-and-extreme-heat/heat-health-alerts-subscribe>
* Advise those at risk to seek medical help if they are feeling unwell and reassure them that plans are in place to deliver services safely despite coronavirus (COVID-19).
* Actively engage with clients and patients about how they are recovering from the heat and identify and respond to any new or emerging needs.

# Additional links to coronavirus (COVID-19) resources

* Department of Health coronavirus (COVID-19) website: This provides a portal to a collection of resources for various sectors. <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>
* COVID-19 Pandemic Plan for the Victorian Health Sector: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/emergency-type/infectious-diseases/covid-19-pandemic-plan>
* Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)
<https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/australian-health-sector-emergency-response-plan-for-novel-coronavirus-covid-19>
* Information for health services and professionals: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/health-services-and-professionals-coronavirus-covid-19>
* Clinical guidance and resources: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/clinical-guidance-and-resources-covid-19>
* Information for community services: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/information-community-services-coronavirus-covid-19>
* Information for business and industry: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/business-sector-coronavirus-disease-covid-19>

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1. <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/environmental-health/climate-weather-and-public-health/heatwaves-and-extreme-heat/heatwave-research> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/environmental-health/climate-weather-and-public-health/heatwaves-and-extreme-heat> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The roadmap to reopening can be found at <https://www.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19-restrictions-roadmaps>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)