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| Heat Health Preparedness Guidance |
| Guidance for mental health services – November 2022 |

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service providers, seek local knowledge and input from Elders to create culturally safe and accessible services to assist community members experiencing heat-related illness.

### Reacquaint yourself and staff to heat health

* Remind yourself and staff about the physical health effects of extreme heat, and which clients might be at higher risk of heat related harm.
* Remind yourself and staff about the mental health effects of extreme heat, including an increased risk of suicide, mental health-related hospital admissions and mental health-related emergency department presentations.[[1]](#footnote-1)
* Consider the effect that heat may have on prescribed medications that may be taken by your clients. Some medications may have drug levels that are affected by dehydration (e.g., lithium) or may interfere with thermoregulation (e.g., selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, antipsychotics). Furthermore, some medications may also be less effective or more toxic when stored at high temperatures.
* Consider the risk of unplanned alcohol or drug withdrawal if clients are unable to cope with the heat to be able to use public transport to access alcohol or drugs, including prescribed medication and opioid maintenance therapy.
* Consider holding a meeting prior to summer to increase staff awareness and to conduct any training related to heat and health.

Prepare the workforce

* Extreme heat can affect anyone, including staff. Remind staff how to look after themselves during extreme heat and heatwaves (e.g., provide advice on staying hydrated, advice to stay cool while travelling to and from work, and encourage regular breaks).
* Plan for staff shortages during periods of extreme heat, and increased demand for services, including on the days that follow the extreme heat event or heatwave.
* Consider key staff and management who should be involved in your organisation’s preparedness planning and response to extreme heat and heatwaves.
* Consider holding team meetings to discuss your organisation's response to heat and to develop a written policy and heat plan. Consider undertaking a practice run of your heat plan.
* Plan to hold an evaluation meeting with staff after an extreme heat event or heatwave to discuss how they dealt with it, what went well, and what could be improved.

### Prepare at-risk clients

When seeing clients who may be at risk of heat-related illness, your organisation can take the opportunity to provide education and assess supports:

* Consider sharing information about heat health with your clients through written information, videos, social media and information sessions. There are [heat health take-home resources for clients and their carers which are available from the department’s website](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources> (Note that these are available in a range of community languages).
* Educate those at risk about how to look after themselves during hot weather. Advise them to drink fluids during hot weather, preferably water and fruit juices, and to avoid alcohol and caffeine (e.g., tea, coffee). Encourage appropriate behaviour such as reducing excessive clothing, staying out of the heat where possible, wearing a hat and sunscreen outdoors, using electric fans, applying damp towels containing ice to the skin, and taking cool showers.
* Advise clients that the heat may affect their medication, and to speak to their doctor for more information. Their doctor can consider reviewing their medication, and assess the risks and benefits of any changes to their medication regime.
* Check they have appropriate follow-up and supports in place, including that their care plan contains contact details for their care workers.
* [Consider the need to optimise the home environment](https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/energy-efficiency-and-reducing-emissions/save-energy-in-the-home/reduce-cooling-costs-at-home/cool-your-home-in-summer) <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/energy-efficiency-and-reducing-emissions/save-energy-in-the-home/reduce-cooling-costs-at-home/cool-your-home-in-summer> (e.g., appropriate home temperature, knowing which room is the coolest room of the house, window shading and ventilation, cooling options, adequately working fridges and freezers). If clients can’t cool their homes, advise them to spend time in an air-conditioned public space during the heat, including any public heat refuges provided by your local council.
* Have a low threshold to refer at-risk clients to their doctor, ED and/or urgent respite placement as required.
* Remind any carers of the importance of also caring for themselves, especially during the heat.

### Prepare for changes to service delivery

* Consider developing a list of at-risk clients and how you will ensure that this list is accessible to relevant staff. Consider calling at-risk clients daily during hot days to check on their welfare and provide tips about keeping cool. Note that there is guidance for service providers on supporting people by telephone [which is available from the department’s website](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources>.
* Considering registering appropriate clients who have consented with [Red Cross’ Telecross service](https://www.redcross.org.au/services/telecross/) <https://www.redcross.org.au/services/telecross/> to receive a daily telephone call to check on their wellbeing and with their local government’s [vulnerable persons register](https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/vulnerable-people-emergencies-policy-guideline-2-vulnerable-persons-register) <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/vulnerable-people-emergencies-policy-guideline-2-vulnerable-persons-register> to receive support during an emergency.
* Consider rescheduling appointments to earlier times of the day when it is cooler, postponing appointments to another day, or cancelling activities completely (e.g., outdoor group Occupational Therapy classes) to prevent clients and staff from travelling in the heat. You can also consider switching face-to-face appointments to a phone call where appropriate to limit travel for both staff and clients.
* Consider providing an extreme heat pack (e.g., water bottles, maps of local cool places, heat health information, myki or taxi vouchers to travel to and from appointments, passes to public swimming pools) to clients.
* Where possible, consider picking up medication and groceries for clients unable to travel safely in the heat.

### Prepare the facilities

* Consider the need to optimise your organisation’s facilities including, any maintenance for cooling equipment and applying for rebates for the [installation of solar panels](https://www.solar.vic.gov.au/solar-business-program) <https://www.solar.vic.gov.au/solar-business-program>.
* Ensure the organisation is heat-friendly for clients and staff, with a cool waiting room, water and ice blocks available, blinds closed to block the sun, and regular staff breaks for hydration.
* Consider putting up posters and having printed information in your clinic [which are available from the department’s website](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources> (Note that these are available in a range of community languages).
* Have a plan in case of power outages (e.g., what to do with fridges, options for cooling such as wet towels, ice blocks in an esky and hand-held fans, and hard copy list of contacts for clients, staff and services).
* Have phone numbers of key resources within easy access – emergency departments, local Home and Community Care services, Nurse-On-Call, Royal District Nursing Service.

### Monitor the heat health warnings

* Consider [subscribing to receive heat health warnings](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/subscribe-to-heat-health-alerts) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/subscribe-to-heat-health-alerts> from the Chief Health Officer.
* Consider setting up an emergency ‘watch zone’ for your organisation on the [Vic Emergency website](https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/) <https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/> to be notified of emergencies, including fires, that occur in your area.
* Have a prepared and practiced response to a heat health warning for your organisation.
* Develop and implement a communication policy to keep staff and clients updated if extreme heat or a heatwave is forecasted.

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1. Liu J, Varghese BM, Hansen A, Xiang J, Zhang Y, Dear K, Gourley M, Driscoll T, Morgan G, Capon A, Bi P. Is there an association between hot weather and poor mental health outcomes? A systematic review and meta-analysis. Environment international. 2021 Aug 1;153:106533. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)