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How to get ready for heat waves



What makes a heat wave different from just a hot day? That depends on where the heat wave is taking place. In tropical places, extreme heat is not unusual. But when a heat wave happens in cooler places, people often don't know how to protect themselves from heat stroke and other heat-related conditions. In the summer of 2006 for instance, a heat wave spread throughout the United States and Canada, hitting record highs of 117 degrees in places such as Pierre, S.D., and killing 225 people.

Heat waves can come on suddenly and without warning. So here are a few tips on how to protect yourself and your family if you experience a heat wave.



Before a heat wave

- Even if you normally don't use an air conditioner in your home, it's a good idea to have a window unit put in, to protect yourself against heat stroke on days of extreme heat.
- Keep a fan on hand that can be moved to different rooms in your home.
- Have light clothing available — cotton, light colored — even if you live in a normally cooler area.
- Have a supply of bottled water on hand, stored in a cool place, such as a dark closet or basement, if possible.



During a heat wave

- Avoid strenuous, outdoor exercise. If you must do any type of heavy activity, try to do it in the early morning, before 7 a.m.
- Stay in air conditioning on high temperature days. If you don't have air conditioning in your home, stay on a lower floor or go to a library or other public building during the warmest hours of the day.
- Even if you are not thirsty, drink plenty of water. And stay away from drinks with alcohol or caffeine, which can make you even more dehydrated!
- Eat small meals and eat more often. Avoid protein, such as dairy and chicken, as it can heat up your body during periods of excessive heat. Now is a great time to eat pasta and bread!
- Take cool showers to lower your body heat.
- If you take salt tablets, talk to your doctor to find out if you should stop during a heat wave.

So what do heat-related illnesses look like?

If you have any of the following symptoms, call your doctor immediately or go to your nearest hospital: feeling faint, dizzy or nauseous, heavy sweating or exhaustion. If you have any of these symptoms, keep drinking cold water slowly — half a glass every 15 minutes. If you are alone, find a family member or neighbor to sit with until you feel better.

If your skin gets hot or very red, your pulse slows down or your breathing gets shallow, get help right away! Call 911 and try to cool your body immediately by taking a cold bath or wrapping your body in a cool sheet. Don't move around a lot; lie down and wait for help to arrive.



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