

# Coping with extreme heat and its impact on mental health

As global temperatures grow hotter, more people throughout the world are facing (or likely will face) extreme heat events. This is when temperatures rise far above normal for several days and nights in a row.

Extreme heat events are the leading cause of weather-related deaths globally.<sup>1</sup> For young children, the elderly, pregnant people and those with chronic illnesses, the risks are especially severe.

Because of global climate change, these heatwaves are happening more often, lasting longer and becoming stronger. Here's a guide on what to know about extreme heat and ways to help protect yourself and loved ones.



## How can extreme heat affect physical wellbeing?

During extremely hot weather, your body can struggle to regulate its internal temperature, which can lead to overheating. This, in turn, can cause dehydration and heat exhaustion, making you feel weak, dizzy and nauseous. Heat exhaustion symptoms also include heavy sweating, headache, fatigue, muscle cramps, fainting, clammy or pale skin, and a weak or fast pulse.

If symptoms progress and your body temperature reaches 103 degrees Fahrenheit (39 degrees Celsius), it can develop into heat stroke, where you might feel confused or even lose consciousness. Your heartbeat may be rapid and your skin red and hot. Seek medical attention immediately if you or someone you know has these symptoms.

Extreme heat can impact your mood and behaviour too, making you feel stressed, irritable, sad or even angry. It can make it hard to concentrate, think clearly, remember or react. Your sleep may suffer too, worsening symptoms like fatigue and irritability. In more severe cases, heat-related stress and discomfort may contribute to increased substance use, thoughts of suicide or violent behaviour.

Your body's inability to regulate its internal temperature can also worsen existing physical and mental health conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, asthma, depression, anxiety and substance use. Eventually, it can damage internal organs like your heart and kidneys.

Beyond the direct human toll, extreme heatwaves can lead to droughts, wildfires, poor air quality, and shortages of water, food and power.



## Protecting yourself in extreme heat<sup>2,3</sup>

### Plan ahead

- Identify cooler places to go, such as a public library or shopping centre
- Heatproof your home as much as possible by adding curtains or blinds to windows, insulating walls, floors and ceilings, or planting shade trees outside
- Pay attention to weather forecasts
- Teach children what to do during the event and in case of an emergency
- Learn self-care techniques such as deep breathing, meditation and mindfulness to help manage stress and anxiety
- Make and maintain social connections for emotional support and a sense of community

### Prepare for the event

- Stock up on food, water and medicines
- Rearrange outings to avoid going outside during extreme heat
- Keep a battery-powered radio, charged mobile phone or battery backup in case of power cuts
- Make plans to keep your loved ones (including pets) safe

### During a heatwave

- Use air conditioning if available
- Have cool baths or showers
- Moisten your skin, such as with a spray water bottle or damp cloth, or wrap a cool, wet towel around your head
- Wear light, loose clothing
- Drink water, even if you don't feel thirsty
- Avoid or rearrange outdoor work and exercise
- Plan important tasks for the coolest part of the day
- Practise self-care techniques to support your mental health
- Check in and stay connected with friends and loved ones
- Also, keep your pet(s) safe with access to water, cool areas and food

### Commit to change

We can all take steps to reduce waste, keep our environment clean and support natural ecosystems to help limit climate change. For example<sup>4</sup>:

- Use public transportation, walk or bike
- Eat less meat and dairy products
- Reuse, recycle and buy fewer things
- Plant native species
- Pick up litter and dispose of it properly
- Educate yourself and others about climate change



### Critical support when you need it

Visit [https://www.optumwellbeing.com/sec\\_CriticalSupportCenter/en-GB](https://www.optumwellbeing.com/sec_CriticalSupportCenter/en-GB) for additional critical support resources and information.

1. World Health Organization. [Heat and health](#). 28 May 2024.
2. Better Health Channel. [How to cope and stay safe in extreme heat](#). 5 Dec 2023.
3. Ready.gov. [Extreme heat](#). 3 Feb 2025.
4. United Nations, [Act now](#).



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