

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.¹ 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 thought-starter 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 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. Get medical support right away if you or someone you know has these symptoms.

Extreme heat can impact your mood and behavior, 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 behavior.

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^{2,3}

Plan ahead

- Identify cooler places to go, such as a public library or shopping center
- Heat-proof 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
- Reschedule outings to avoid going outside during extreme heat
- Keep a battery-powered radio, charged mobile phone or battery backup in case of power outages
- Make plans to keep your loved ones — including pets — safe

During a heatwave

- Use air conditioning if available
- Take 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 reschedule outdoor work and exercise
- Plan important tasks for the coolest time of day
- Practice 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 all can take steps to reduce waste, keep our environment clean and support natural ecosystems to help limit climate change. For example⁴:

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



Critical support when you need it

Visit optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter for additional critical support resources and information.

1. World Health Organization. [Heat and health](#). May 28, 2024.

2. Better Health Channel. [How to cope and stay safe in extreme heat](#). Dec. 5, 2023.

3. Ready.gov. [Extreme heat](#). Feb. 3, 2025.

4. United Nations, [Act now](#).



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