

All About Aging

by Grace Chen, M.D.

Keeping Cool When the Heat is On

Elderly people are at highest risk for heat-related illnesses. Chronic medical conditions and physical changes that occur with aging make it more difficult for their bodies to cool in very hot weather. Some contributing factors may include obesity, dehydration, heart disease, side effects from prescription medications, poor circulation, mental illness and alcohol use. Additionally, humid weather can further compound the problem as sweat does not evaporate as quickly, making it more difficult for the body to release heat.

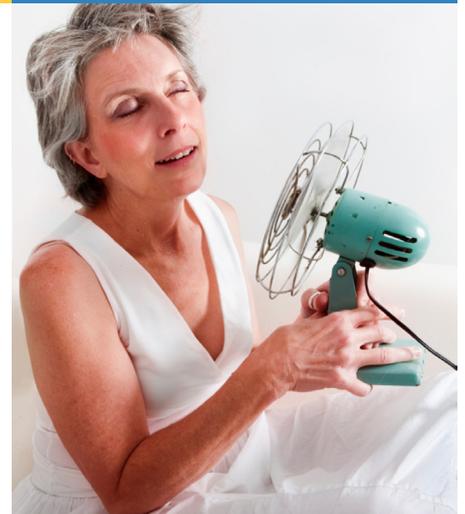
Typical signs and symptoms that you or a loved one may be overheating include:

- nausea
- vomiting
- abdominal cramping
- confusion
- dizziness
- headache
- muscle cramping
- difficulty breathing
- red-hot skin; and
- loss of consciousness

Often times, older adults with several chronic medical conditions – *or their loved ones or caregivers* -- may dismiss these symptoms by thinking they are part of the condition or an accompanying complication. Consequently, it is important to stay vigilant and be proactive to avoid overheating.

Staying in an air-conditioned environment is the number one preventive measure. Unfortunately, air-conditioning is not always available. When that's the case, try to spend time in public facilities that are air-conditioned. Many communities open “cooling centers” during period of high or excessive heat.

Drink plenty of fluids, even when you are not thirsty. Elderly persons often have impaired thirst mechanisms to begin with, so it is vitally important to stay on top of your fluid intake. If you have issues with fluid retention, work closely with your physician to find the right balance between medication dosage and fluid intake. Water is the best form



of liquid. Avoid alcohol or liquids that contain high amounts of sugar or caffeine as these fluids can make you even more dehydrated.

Also avoid direct sunlight and wear loose, lightweight clothing. If you must be outdoors, do so during off-peak hours and use sunscreen, wear light-colored clothing and wide-brimmed hats. Pace yourself and allow more time to do your usual physical activities.

As always, if you or someone you know seems affected by the heat, seek medical care immediately.



Other recommendations include:

- Take cool showers or baths, if possible, to help cool off.
- Avoid using your stove and oven to cook, if possible, as their usage will make your home – and you – hotter.
- Ask a loved one or neighbor to check on you daily. If you are able, check in with them.
- Stay updated with weather forecasts from local news agencies to know when excessive heat warnings are in effect.

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