

# Heat Health Fact Sheet

Extreme heat kills more Australians than any other climate disaster. Global heating and climate change are causing heat waves to be hotter, to happen more often and to last longer. Burning fossil fuels, like coal, oil and gas, release polluting greenhouse gases that are the major contributor to global heating. We must act on global heating, to protect our health.

## Why extreme heat is bad for the body?

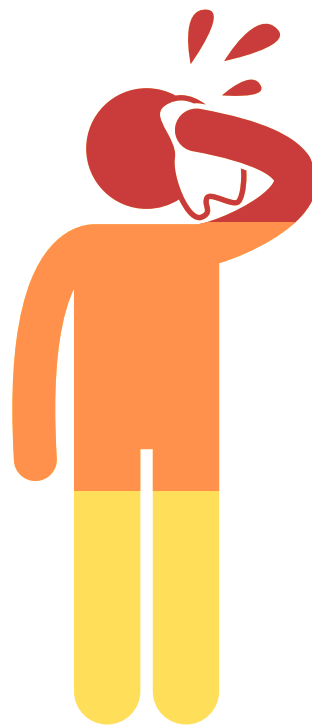
In hot weather, we try to keep our internal body temperature to around 37°C by sweating. But our bodies can eventually overheat, especially if we do not drink enough fluid or move to a cooler place. Illness caused by overheating can be mild to severe.

### Heat Exhaustion

- high internal body temperature (>38°C)
- reduced amount of sweating because of insufficient fluid in the body
- nausea
- vomiting
- headache
- fainting

### Heat Stress

- feeling uncomfortable from heat
- weakness
- tiredness
- cramps
- dizziness



### Heat Stroke

- very high internal body temperature (>40.5°C)
- confusion
- reduced alertness
- red, hot dry skin

Heat Stroke  
can quickly become  
life-threatening

Overheating can also worsen the symptoms of chronic diseases, such as heart, lung and kidney disease, because of the extra strain high temperatures puts on our bodies.

Mental health is also affected by hot weather. Heatwaves can worsen mental health, including the risk of suicide. Other disasters (particularly drought and bushfires) often happen with extreme heat, adding to mental distress.

As our body's first line of defence, our skin is also affected by the external world. Severe heat can worsen skin diseases such as eczema, skin infections and 'prickly heat' (miliaria).

## What makes extreme heat even more dangerous?

Everyone can be affected by extreme heat, though some situations make the health risks worse.

### High Humidity

sweating doesn't work as well for cooling our bodies when there is a lot of moisture in the air.

### High night-time temperatures

make it harder for the body to recover from daytime heat.

### High temperatures early in the season

mean that there has been little chance for our bodies to adjust in the weeks leading up to it.

### Disruptions to essential services

such as communications, electricity, water and transport, affecting cooling systems, supplies, some medical devices and access to help.

### Smog

caused by air pollution and made worse by heat, can make breathing more difficult.

### Bushfires often happen with extreme heat

and this adds the risks of burns, injuries and further loss of life. Bushfire smoke can spread for hundreds of kilometres and irritate the eyes, throat and skin, make breathing difficult as well as worsening heart and lung conditions, including asthma, and diabetes.

Because of the strain on the body that extreme heat causes, the health risks continue for several days after the weather has cooled down.

## Who is most at risk?



People with a chronic medical condition like heart or lung disease, dementia, multiple sclerosis (MS) or poor mental health.



Those who are unwell with a fever, vomiting or diarrhoea, as they become dehydrated easily.



Older people, especially those who are frail or over 65 years



People who are pregnant or breastfeeding — they may go into early labour, or can also get hotter and need more fluids.



Young children, as they cannot manage their body temperature well or change their hot surroundings



Those who take medications that affect the way the body reacts to heat



Those who are unable to move around, including getting enough fluids for themselves



People who are socially isolated or living alone, as no one may know if they are getting sick



People who are homeless or have limited choices in housing, work, transport or cooling



Those who work or exercise outdoors - even people who are fit and healthy

## What can we do?

### Staying safe in the heat

#### Plan Ahead



Plan ahead for hot weather, including power failures — know what to do and where to go to stay cool.

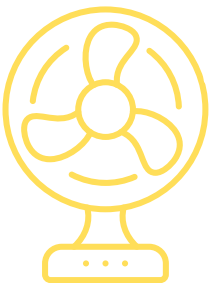
Keep an eye on the forecast — remember the temperature given is the temperature in the shade, it can be 12-15°C hotter in the sun.

Keep strenuous activity to cooler parts of the day.

Stay informed of emergency warnings and advice — by ABC radio, state and territory emergency services phone apps and websites.

Medication — ask your doctor or pharmacist if yours needs any changes in hot weather and store it in a cool area.

#### Keep cool and stay hydrated



Drink plenty of fluids, but avoid alcohol. Wear light, loose clothing.

Seek shade and remember that it can be cooler outside in the shade than in a hot building.

Draw curtains, blinds and awnings to keep as much sun out as possible.

Fans make the room feel about 4°C cooler by speeding up sweat evaporation. They can be combined with other ways of keeping cool. Don't use fans at all above 40°C because at these temperatures you cannot sweat enough to create the cooling effect and they just blow hot air onto the body.

If you are using air conditioning, you can safely set the thermostat to 27°C and use a fan to lower temperatures further. Fans use 5% of the electricity that air conditioners do, so you can save money and reduce emissions by doing this.

Go to cool public areas like community or shopping centres and local libraries.

Take regular cool showers or baths, splash yourself several times a day with cold water or dampen your clothing.

Do not leave anyone in parked cars — especially children and pets.

Provide enough shade and water for pets too.

Air hot buildings whenever it is cooler outside — usually this is at night.

#### Look out for others and know what to do in an emergency



Stay in touch with family and friends, especially if they are at higher risk.

Learn first aid for heatstroke and heat exhaustion.

Phone '000' in a life-threatening emergency.

## Urban planning and design

Many buildings are not designed or built for extreme heat. Cities are particularly hot as they often have few trees to protect them and their hard surfaces stay hot for a long time.

Our built-up areas can be made cooler and more liveable through:

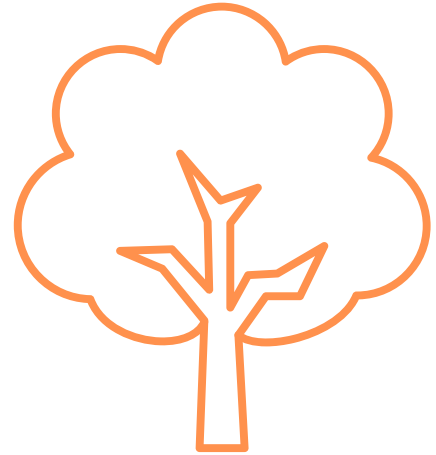
better insulation, ventilation and shading of buildings.

more trees and greenery.

fewer hard surfaces.

improved public transport, including shading for waiting passengers.

improved shading of paths for walkers and cyclists.

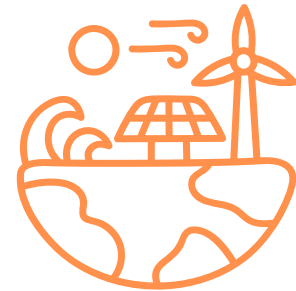


## Climate action

Although not everyone has contributed equally to greenhouse gas emissions, we all suffer as the planet we share keeps getting hotter. We must take urgent, effective action to slow the heating of the planet.

Australia's federal and state governments must:

- cut greenhouse gas pollution from burning coal, oil and gas
- use renewable energy instead
- protect the natural world that cools our planet — as well as giving us food and cleaning our air and water.



## More information

Doctors for the Environment Australia [resources](#)

[Heatwaves and health in Australia](#)

[How climate change affects your health: the facts](#)

[Bushfires and Your Health Fact Sheet](#)

## Government heat health information

[Australian](#)

[Australian Capital Territory](#)

[New South Wales](#)

[Northern Territory](#)

[Tasmania](#)

[South Australia](#)

[Queensland](#)

[Victoria](#)

[Western Australia](#)

[Safework Australia](#)

[ABC Emergency website](#)

[Bureau of Meteorology Heatwave Knowledge Centre](#)

# Bushfires & Your Health Fact Sheet



## About Us

Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA) is an independent, self-funded, non-government organisation of medical doctors in all Australian states and territories.

DEA's work is based on the premise that humans need a future with clean air and water, healthy soils capable of producing nutritious food, a stable climate, and a complex, diverse and interconnected humanity whose needs are met in a sustainable way. We are therefore interested in environmental protection and restoration to promote human health and social stability.

Our members work across all specialities in community, hospital, and private practices.

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## Socials



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