

Hot Weather and Homelessness

Preventing illness and death in summer

People working in homelessness services, or supporting people who are homeless in other ways, need to be aware of the risks to health that hot weather brings.

Temperatures around 25°C and over are associated with excess summer deaths. The UK Health Security Agency [Heatwave Plan for England](#) warns that: “in contrast to deaths associated with cold snaps in winter, the rise in mortality as a result of very warm weather follows very sharply – within one or two days of the temperature rising.” Being prepared and acting early are key to protecting people’s health.

Deaths may be from underlying illnesses made worse by heat – primarily lung and heart diseases – or from heat specific conditions, such as heat exhaustion and heatstroke. Mental ill health may also worsen during hot weather.

The high risk factors and vulnerabilities associated with homelessness are set out in [Making the Case: the impact of heat on health – now and in the future](#):

“homeless people (those who sleep in shelters as well as outdoors) may be at increased risk from heatwaves. Higher rates of chronic disease (often poorly controlled), smoking, respiratory conditions, substance dependencies and mental illness are more frequent in homeless populations than in the general population. These risk factors increase the risks of heat related morbidity and mortality, on top of social isolation, lack of air conditioning, cognitive impairment, living alone and being exposed to urban heat islands.”¹

These risk factors vary significantly between people experiencing homelessness and between places, but they can all increase the risks to health from heat.

For people sleeping on the streets, it can be a challenge to find drinking water, cool showers and cool spaces to spend time in. Without safe storage, people are often wearing extra layers or carrying heavy bags all day.

It isn’t only people sleeping rough who are affected – in some shelter and hostel buildings, temperatures don’t drop to comfortable levels at night. And whether housed or not, people may be drinking more alcohol during longer daylight hours, increasing their risk of dehydration.

Heat and COVID-19

In addition to established risks, [UKHSA warn](#) that: “COVID-19 amplifies the risk of hot weather... People at risk from high temperatures may also be vulnerable to COVID-19 infection, and vice versa.”

The impact of coronavirus restrictions may also pose new problems. People are likely to be spending more time indoors in small, hot rooms. When outside, access to drinking water and air-conditioned public buildings has been restricted. Patterns of begging and street giving have changed, while building-based services cannot welcome as many people indoors during the heat of the day. Social distancing and hygiene measures might be compromised if people share bottles of water or gather together to stay in the shade.

¹ An ‘urban heat island’ refers to cities or other urban areas that are warmer than rural or less densely populated areas surrounding it. Urban areas create and retain heat due to buildings, roads, transport and other human activities, which all lead to higher day and night time temperatures in these areas.

Heat exhaustion and heatstroke

If someone is showing signs of heat exhaustion, such as a headache, dizziness and confusion, loss of appetite and feeling sick, excessive sweating and pale, clammy skin, cramps in the arms, legs and stomach, fast breathing or pulse, a high temperature or feeling very thirsty, the immediate priority is to help them cool down and rehydrate.

The [NHS advises](#) four things that you can do to cool someone down:

1. Move them to a cool place.
2. Get them to lie down and raise their feet slightly.
3. Get them to drink plenty of water. Sports or rehydration drinks are OK.
4. Cool their skin – spray or sponge them with cool water and fan them. Cold packs around the armpits or neck are good too.

Most people should start to recover within 30 minutes if they aren't seriously unwell. If they are still feeling unwell after resting in a cool place for 30 minutes and drinking plenty of water or rehydration drinks, seek medical help. Consult your doctor if they feel unusual symptoms or if symptoms persist.

Heatstroke is a medical emergency. Call 999 if a person develops any signs of heatstroke, such as confusion or becoming unconscious or unresponsive, a seizure (fit), not sweating even though too hot, a temperature of 40°C or above, fast breathing or shortness of breath.

Taking action to save lives

Despite the complex issues at play, there are simple actions that we can take to help reduce deaths in hot weather. Homelessness charities can:

1. [Sign up](#) for Met Office heat health alerts.
2. Raise awareness of heat risks among staff and the people you support e.g. download the UK Government [Beat the Heat guidance](#), ensure all staff are aware of the signs and symptoms of heat exhaustion and heatstroke, and know what to do if someone is suffering from them.
3. Use this [heatwave checklist](#) for residential settings.
4. Increase access to cool or shady spaces, indoors and outdoors, and talk to your local authority or other organisations locally about what they could do to increase access to safe, cool spaces for vulnerable people who are homeless.
5. Source or provide drinking water (following infection control measures e.g. no-touch or frequently cleaned dispenser), refillable water bottles (for dogs too!), sunscreen and summer clothing (including hats and sunglasses) – ask local businesses and supporters for donations
6. Arrange for safe storage of winter coats and heavy bags.
7. Map drinking water, public toilets and air conditioned public buildings in your local area for people out during the day.

Members of the public

If you want to help someone who is on the street:

1. Check if they are happy to accept items such as water, sunscreen, food etc – there may be a risk of coronavirus transmission from direct giving.
2. Ask a nearby café if they will let you 'pay it forward', purchasing items for the person to collect.
3. Help the person to send a [StreetLink alert](#) or [find a local support service](#) if they are in need of essential provision.