



Caring for older people in heatwaves – residential aged care

Residential aged care service providers need to be aware of the risks of heatwaves, especially during the Australian summer. A heatwave is a period of unusual and uncomfortable hot weather that can affect human health, community infrastructures and services.

Older people may not know the dangers of a heatwave and its health impacts.

Heatwave checklist

This checklist serves as a guide to help you support your aged care residents before, during and after a heatwave. It is important that you train and support your aged care workers to manage both the health of residents, and their own health, during a heatwave.

Before a heatwave

- ☐ Include and test specific heatwave emergency management provisions in individual care plans, existing policies and communication planning.
- ☐ Assess which residents are at more risk and will need extra support. This will include where residents may have limited capacity to keep themselves cool.
- ☐ Check that your aged care home's cooling systems, refrigerators and thermometers are working and efficient. Organise technicians to regularly clean and service the system.
- ☐ Check the back-up systems for power outages or equipment failures and test to ensure they are working.
- ☐ Assess your aged care home inside and out for both shaded and heat prone areas. Take necessary steps to ensure there are enough shaded communal areas.
- ☐ Prepare extra catering, linen, drinks and hygiene supplies for residents, workers and visitors.

During a heatwave

- ☐ Enact emergency and disaster management plans and inform residents, their families and carers, workers and volunteers, and visitors.
- ☐ Ensure the temperature in residents' rooms and around the aged care home is comfortable. Keep curtains and blinds closed to reduce heat, particularly for windows facing the sun. If cooler outside, open the windows to allow fresh air inside.

- ☐ Be aware that older people are prone to heat stress after hot nights. Make fluids available to residents at night and in the morning. Offer different forms of fluids such as jelly, ice-cream or fruit juice blocks to keep your residents hydrated.
- ☐ Offer extra lukewarm showers, sponging, cool wraps and packs, wet towels or foot baths to help residents to cool down.
- ☐ Encourage residents to drink small amounts of fluid often to prevent dehydration. Older people can become dehydrated if they drink large amounts of fluid infrequently. Be aware that alcoholic and caffeinated drinks can cause dehydration.
- ☐ Encourage residents to drink cool, rather than cold water. This helps to regulate body temperature and reduce the risk of stomach cramps.
- ☐ Be aware that residents who take diuretics or medication for liver and kidney disease are more prone to dehydration from sugar intake. Monitor their sugar intake to prevent dehydration.
- ☐ Support residents to eat frequent small meals to provide nutrition as heat can lessen appetite.
- ☐ Encourage residents to use sunscreen and wear a hat, sunglasses and loose clothing that covers skin when exposed to direct sunlight.
- ☐ Monitor physical signs of heat stress, such as nausea, red, pale or severely dry skin, and changes in urine colour. Darker urine can suggest dehydration.
- ☐ Encourage residents to stay indoors in extreme heat. If they must leave, ask workers or volunteers to go with them. Avoid going outside between 11 am and 3 pm.
- ☐ Arrange a clinical assessment if a resident shows any signs of health decline.

After a heatwave

- ☐ Support residents to rest. Heat can cause extreme tiredness.
- ☐ If the air outside is cooler, open windows to allow that air to cool down your aged care home.
- ☐ Enact communication plans to keep older people, their families and carers, workers and volunteers, and visitors informed after a heatwave.
- ☐ Review your emergency management preparedness and response. Where appropriate, apply changes to better support your residents.

Clinical assessment

For concerns about resident's wellbeing, contact their doctor immediately. You must organise a clinical assessment if a resident shows any signs of health decline. The effects of heat-related illnesses can range from a rash or cramps to severe confusion or heat stroke.