

Heatwaves and patient care for primary health care providers

What is a heatwave?

A heatwave is a period of time when the maximum and minimum temperatures are unusually and uncomfortably high for more than three days, compared to the local climate and past weather.

During heatwaves, the continued high overnight and daytime temperatures can:

- lead to heat-related illness and health problems
- affect infrastructure such as public transport
- interrupt electricity supply used for cooling and refrigeration.

Heatwave intensity

The Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) classifies heatwaves by levels of intensity which include:

- low-intensity heatwaves – frequent during summer
- severe heatwaves – less frequent and can be more challenging for at-risk patients
- extreme heatwaves – rare and can impact all patients who do not take precautions to keep cool.

At-risk patients during heatwaves

According to the [WA Government Heatwave State Hazard Plan](#), the following patient cohorts are at risk during heatwaves.

Patients over 65 years old, especially those:

- in residential aged care
- living alone or socially isolated.

Patients with chronic conditions, including:

- heart conditions
- diabetes
- respiratory disease
- renal insufficiency
- Parkinson's disease
- severe mental illness
- impaired sweating, due to burns, skin or genetic disorder
- conditions requiring community/ambulatory care.

Patients taking multiple medications, particularly:

- anticholinergics
- vasoconstrictors
- antihistamines
- diuretics
- antihypertensives
- psychoactive drugs.

Patients unable to adapt behaviour to stay cool due to:

- dementia
- disability
- being bedridden
- being babies or very young
- substance abuse
- being in a higher weight range
- being pregnant or breastfeeding.

Additional patient populations who may be vulnerable to the effects of heatwaves include:

- Aboriginal people
- culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people who may have limited understanding of the impacts
- people living in rural and remote locations
- people experiencing homelessness
- people with low incomes
- people living in suboptimal housing conditions
- people with disabilities
- people in hot workplaces
- people who work outside
- adult and children's sporting and athletic groups
- acutely unwell patients living in urban heat islands, such as the Perth Central Business District (CBD), where the temperature gradient may be higher by several degrees Celsius due to the reduction in green space, high building density and the nature of street surface coating material.

Prevention, preparedness, response and recovery (PPRR) for patients

Primary health care providers can play a significant role in mitigating the adverse effects of heatwaves on their patients by implementing a range of effective strategies that consider prevention, preparedness, response and recovery (PPRR).

Fact Sheet

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Prevention for patients

- Be aware of your practice's at-risk patient cohorts and have an identifier in their record or the capacity to create a client list.
- Provide education and resources about heat-related illness and health problems in waiting rooms and consulting rooms, via social media or by partnering with community organisations.
- During consultations with at-risk patients, discuss how they can manage their individual health conditions during periods of extreme heat.
- Provide heatwave advice, tailored to each at-risk patient's requirements, from the following list:
 - Maintain hydration throughout the day.
 - Avoid unnecessary physical activity.
 - Stay inside during the hottest part of the day.
 - Wear light-coloured, loose-fitting clothing.
 - Use light-coloured curtains in the home.
 - Close internal doors in the home.
 - Move to the cooler side of the home during the afternoon.
 - Use air-conditioning and/or fans if available or go to publicly available air-conditioned places, such as libraries or shopping centres.
 - Stock up on food that doesn't require cooking.
 - Have back-up battery operated equipment, including radios and charged mobile phones, in the event of a power outage.
 - Ensure power banks are fully charged.
 - Have a back-up plan if necessary medical equipment is reliant on electricity.

Preparedness for patients

- Develop a personalised action plan with at-risk patients and their families about what they will do during a heatwave, including check-ins or relocating to a cooler residence.
- Provide education and resources about heat-related illness and health problems in waiting rooms and consulting rooms, via social media or by partnering with community organisations.
- Implement a system utilising an at-risk patient list to check-in on patients without family or carers.
- Utilise bulk text message alerts to notify patients of predicted heatwaves, extreme heat events, heat-related health symptoms as well as when and how to seek medical assistance.
- Advise eligible patients about the [Thermoregulatory Dysfunction Energy Subsidy](#) to offset energy costs for controlling the temperature in their home.

Response for patients (during a heatwave)

- Ensure there are on-the-day or emergency appointments allocated in your practice to enable at-risk patients to be seen in a timely manner.
- Provide telehealth appointments where appropriate so at-risk patients can avoid travelling during the heat of the day.
- Consider transport options for at-risk patients who do not have easy access to transport.
- Ensure an adequate supply of cool drinking water for patients attending the practice.
- Have a roster of staff who can provide phone check-ins for at-risk patients and implement a system of escalation.
- Utilise bulk text message alerts to advise patients of practice closures or changes to operating hours.
- Consider home visits for the most vulnerable at-risk patients as required.

Recovery for patients

- Ensure there are on-the-day or emergency appointments allocated in your practice to enable at-risk patients to be seen in a timely manner.
- Provide ongoing care and support to patients who may have heat-related illness or health problems.
- Follow up patients with heat-related illness or health problems after discharge from acute care.
- Work with patients and their family or carer to review their heatwave action plan.
- Provide education and resources about heat-related illness and health problems in waiting rooms and consulting rooms, via social media or by partnering with community organisations.
- Direct patients to [Heatwave Resources and Information Sources](#)

Further information

For more information, refer to the following resources:

- [Heatwave Checklist](#)
- [Heatwave Resources and Information Sources](#)

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