

# Guidance in the event of a heatwave

## for health and social care staff

### Heatwaves can lead to health problems and increased mortality

The changing climate means that we can expect average temperatures to rise and heatwaves to become more common. Because we are not very accustomed to high temperatures in Sweden, our health can be affected at a much lower temperature than in areas such as southern Europe.

### How does heat affect the body?

Heat makes superficial blood vessels dilate and sweating increases. If people are not able to take in enough fluid to compensate for the additional sweating, their blood will become more concentrated and they will be at greater risk of blood clots. If their heart cannot cope with the extra pumping required, serious heart failure may result. Heat-related deaths in elderly people are usually due to circulation problems.

### At-risk groups and medication

- Elderly and very elderly people are generally more sensitive to heat because both their thermoregulation and their ability to feel thirst may be impaired. They are also more likely to have chronic health conditions, take medication and have a disability, which can increase the risk of health problems in a heatwave.
- Chronic health conditions such as cardiovascular diseases and pulmonary diseases such as asthma and COPD can be worsened by heat. Those with diseases of the renal system, diabetes, dementia or mental illness may also be at greater risk.
- People with intellectual disabilities may find it more difficult to recognise risks and their bodies' warning signals.
- In people with physical disabilities, the body's signalling pathways may not work properly, and they may need practical assistance with things such as extra fluids, changing clothes and relocating to a cooler location.
- Young children and pregnant women can be particularly vulnerable in hot weather. Young children have often not yet developed the ability to sweat. They may

also lack the ability or judgement to move themselves away from heat. Pregnant women are at some increased risk of giving birth prematurely.

- People taking medication may also be at greater risk. Some medication affects the body's ability to adjust its body temperature and fluid balance. This applies for example to diuretics or anti-depressive medicines and antipsychotics. Remember that medication can lose its effectiveness if stored incorrectly. Read the package leaflet for storage information.

### Heat warnings from SMHI

SMHI, the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute, issues notices and warnings about high temperatures so that measures can be put in place locally in time to assist vulnerable groups in the community. In the event of such a warning, you should aim to start getting help to service users as quickly as possible. The heat may also be stressful for you and your colleagues, so additional staff may be needed.

SMHI will issue the following:

- A notice about high temperatures when the forecast indicates that the maximum temperature will be at least 26 degrees Celsius for three consecutive days.
- Yellow warning when the maximum daily temperature is expected to reach 30 degrees Celsius or more, for three to four consecutive days.
- Orange warning when the maximum daily temperature is expected to reach 30 degrees Celsius for five consecutive days, or if the daily maximum temperature is expected to reach 33 degrees Celsius for at least three consecutive days.

SMHI sends out notices and warnings via [smhi.se](https://smhi.se), its mobile app, and on national radio stations P1 and P4. The information is also available on [krisinformation.se](https://krisinformation.se).

More information about the health effects of heatwaves and guidance on action plans and advice for healthcare staff and at-risk groups can be found on the Public Health Agency of Sweden's website: [folkhalsomyndigheten.se/varmebolja](https://folkhalsomyndigheten.se/varmebolja)

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# Heatwave? Here's what you can do

Hot weather in the summer can cause health problems. The groups mainly at risk are elderly people, those with chronic health conditions and people with a disability. A heatwave means an increased risk for mortality and ill-health. Taking these actions will help to avoid ill-health and sickness.



**PAY ATTENTION TO INDOOR TEMPERATURES** Health problems are likely to increase as soon as indoor temperatures rise. Risks increase significantly when the outdoor temperature reaches 26°C or above for three consecutive days.



**ENCOURAGE INCREASED FLUID INTAKE** Avoid large amounts of sweetened drinks and alcohol. Serve food with a high water content, e.g. fruit and vegetables.



**MAKE LIVING SPACES COOL** Make use of curtains, blinds and awnings. It is important that vulnerable service users use the coolest areas in their accommodation. Open the windows at night when the outside temperature is lower.



**PROVIDE BODY COOLING MEASURES** A cool shower works best. Alternatively, place a wet towel around the neck. Loose clothing made of natural fabrics is cooler than tight-fitting synthetics.



**AVOID STRENUOUS PHYSICAL ACTIVITY** especially during the hottest times of the day.



**STORE MEDICATION CORRECTLY** If the medication is temperature-sensitive there is storage information on the packaging or in the package leaflet.

**PAY EXTRA ATTENTION TO YOUR SERVICE USERS AND HOW THEY ARE FEELING** Warning signals include a higher body temperature and a more rapid pulse or breathing rate, dizziness and abnormal tiredness. A dry mouth and reduced urination may be signs that a person is dehydrated. If any of these problems arise, you should get a medical assessment. Medication dosage may also need to be reviewed, e.g. for diuretics, anti-depressive medicines or antipsychotics.

This guidance has been produced with the help of WHO's 'Advice on preventing health effects of heat' (2011) and the Public Health Agency of Sweden's report 'Health effects from heat waves' (2022) [in Swedish].



Folkhälsomyndigheten  
PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY OF SWEDEN