

## Heat (Heat Wave)

**Learn what heat hazards may occur where you are and how to plan for excessive heat should it occur in your area. Different areas have different risks associated with prolonged heat. Contact your local emergency management office, National Weather Service office, or American Red Cross chapter for information.**

(Review acknowledgment: The Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Atmospheric Programs, Global Programs Division, Global Change Information Branch, reviewed this chapter, in addition to the agencies listed in the acknowledgments and on the cover of *Talking About Disaster: Guide for Standard Messages*.)

### AWARENESS INFORMATION

#### Why talk about excessive heat?

In recent years, excessive heat has caused more deaths than all other weather events, including floods. The American Meteorological Society reports that on average heat kills more than 1,000 people each year. During the July 1995 heat wave in Chicago, approximately 525 people died over a 5-day period. Thousands of people were taken to local hospitals as a result of excessive heat.

#### What is a heat wave?

A heat wave is a prolonged period of excessive heat, often combined with excessive humidity. Generally, excessive heat is defined as temperatures that hover 10 degrees or more above the average high temperature for the region during summer months, last for a prolonged period of time, and often are accompanied by high humidity.

#### What is the heat index?

The heat index is the temperature the body feels when the effects of heat and humidity are combined. Exposure to direct sunlight can increase the heat index by up to 15°F.

#### What are heat cramps, heat exhaustion, heatstroke, and sunstroke?

Heat cramps are muscular pains and spasms caused by heavy exertion in high heat. Heat cramps are often the first sign that the body is having trouble with the heat.

Heat exhaustion typically involves the loss of body fluids through heavy sweating when someone strenuously exercises or works in high heat and humidity. In someone suffering from heat exhaustion, blood flow to the skin increases while blood flow to vital organs decreases, resulting in a mild form of shock. If not treated, body temperature will continue to rise and the person may suffer heatstroke.

Heatstroke (also known as sunstroke) is a life-threatening condition in which a person's temperature control system, which produces sweating to cool the body, stops working. The body temperature of someone suffering from heatstroke can rise so high that brain damage and death may result if the body is not cooled quickly.