

How can I protect myself in a heat wave?

The best ways to be protected from the ill effects of excessive heat are to dress appropriately, stay indoors, refrain from strenuous work or exercise during the hottest part of the day, and stay hydrated. Spending at least two hours a day in air conditioning significantly decreases a person's risk of heat-related illnesses.

Heat can kill by pushing the human body beyond its limits. Under normal conditions, the body's internal thermostat produces perspiration that evaporates and cools the body. However, in excessive heat and high humidity, evaporation is slowed and the body must work extra hard to maintain a normal temperature.

Elderly people, young children, and those who are sick or overweight are more likely to become victims of excessive heat. Because men sweat more than women do, they become more quickly dehydrated and are more susceptible to heat illness.

The duration of excessive heat plays an important role in how people are affected by a heat wave. Studies have shown a significant rise in heat-related illnesses when excessive heat lasts more than two days.

People living in urban areas may be at greater risk from the effects of a prolonged heat wave than are people living in rural regions. An increased health problem, especially for those with respiratory difficulties, can occur when stagnant atmospheric conditions trap pollutants in urban areas, thus adding unhealthy air to excessively hot temperatures. In addition, asphalt and concrete store heat longer and gradually release heat, resulting in significantly higher temperatures, especially at night—an occurrence known as the "urban heat island effect."

Pets, horses, and livestock are also susceptible to difficulties from excessive heat. Animals do not perspire and rely on panting, wetting down, shade, cool earth, and drinking water for cooling. Animals cannot explain their needs, so it is up to people to take extra care that during heat waves, their needs are met.

What is the best source of information in a heat wave?

Local radio, television stations, and NOAA Weather Radio are the best sources of information in a heat wave.

NOAA Weather Radio is the prime alerting and critical information delivery system of the National Weather Service (NWS). NOAA Weather Radio broadcasts warnings, watches, forecasts, and other hazard information 24 hours a day over more than 650 stations in the 50 states, adjacent coastal waters, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the U.S. Pacific territories.

The NWS encourages people to buy a weather radio equipped with the Specific Area Message Encoder (SAME) feature. This feature automatically alerts you when important excessive heat information is issued for your area. Information on NOAA Weather Radio is available from your local NWS office or at www.nws.noaa.gov/nwr.