



advice and support for older age

**Independent  
Age**

**Factsheet**

# Summer Wise

Getting through a heat wave.

Call FREE on **0800 319 6789** Visit **[www.independentage.org](http://www.independentage.org)**

Last reviewed: June 2017

Next review date: June 2018

## About Independent Age

Whatever happens as we get older, we all want to remain independent and live life on our own terms. That's why, as well as offering regular friendly contact and a strong campaigning voice, Independent Age can provide you and your family with clear, free and impartial advice on the issues that matter: care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility.

A charity founded over 150 years ago, we're independent so you can be.

The information in this factsheet applies to England only.

If you're in Wales, contact Age Cymru (0800 022 3444, [agecymru.org.uk](http://agecymru.org.uk)) for information and advice.

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland (0800 12 44 222, [agescotland.org.uk](http://agescotland.org.uk)).

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI (0808 808 7575, [ageni.org](http://ageni.org)).

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While the summer may lift our spirits, older people can suffer adverse effects on their health during the hot weather and can be more vulnerable to illnesses such as heatstroke, heat exhaustion and dehydration. Changes in our bodies mean we're less likely to notice when we feel hot, take longer to cool down and are less likely to feel thirsty.

Temperatures can sometimes get too high and it can become dangerously hot. You may be particularly at risk if you're living with a chronic health condition, especially dementia, heart, breathing or mobility problems or if you're on certain medications. The Meteorological Office has a warning system if a heat wave is likely and it's important to be prepared.

Read our top tips for keeping cool in the sun. Some of them may just seem like common sense, but they can make a big difference to your wellbeing.

## **Stay hydrated**

- Drink more fluids than normal in hot weather. Have cool drinks like water and diluted fruit juice and limit the amount of drinks with caffeine in them (tea, coffee, cola, etc). Avoid

excess alcohol and drinks that are high in sugar as these can dehydrate you.

- Many older people get up frequently in the night to go to the toilet and may reduce the amount they drink before going to bed. Avoid doing this when it's hot as you risk becoming dehydrated.
- Try to eat cold foods, especially salads and fruits like watermelon as they contain a lot of water.
- Keep an eye out for the symptoms of dehydration, which can include dizziness, thirst, headaches and tiredness. Ongoing dehydration can lead to urine infections, muscle damage, constipation and kidney stones.
- If you're fasting for Ramadan during a heat wave, make sure you drink before dawn and keep cool. People with some health conditions shouldn't fast. The NHS website has more information ([nhs.uk/Livewell/Healthylramadan](https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Healthylramadan)).

## **Dress for the weather**

- Wear a hat and sunscreen of at least SPF 15 with four or five star UVA protection to protect your skin. Apply sunscreen generously half an hour before going out and then again just before you go into the sun. Reapply it regularly and after you've been in water.
- Wear sunglasses to protect your eyes. Choose a pair with a CE mark or statement that they provide 100% UV protection. A wraparound design is best as this can protect your eyes from direct and peripheral sun exposure.
- Loose-fitting, light-coloured cotton clothes are best for staying cool in hot weather.

## **Know the facts about your medication**

- If you're on medication that affects the amount of fluid you're allowed to drink, get advice from your GP on what to do in hot weather.
- Some medication can make your skin more sensitive to the sun or affect your body temperature and your ability to cope in hot weather. Talk to your GP or pharmacist about how best to manage this.

- Store your medication below 25°C or in the fridge. Check the storage instructions on the packaging.

## **Keep cool**

- Avoid too much activity, especially at the hottest times of the day (11am to 3pm). Save essential housework or gardening for early morning or late evening.
- Taking a cool bath or shower, or just splashing cool water over your face and arms, will help you to cool down. A damp cloth on the back of your neck can help too.

## **Plan ahead**

- Be prepared before hot weather arrives. Listen out for heat wave warnings on television and on the radio, or check the Met Office website ([metoffice.gov.uk](http://metoffice.gov.uk)). Keep a thermometer in a commonly used room out of direct sunlight.
- Make sure you have enough supplies of food, water and any medication you need.
- Air pollution can become worse during periods of hot weather. You can keep updated and get health advice and recommended action from

UK-AIR ([uk-air.defra.gov.uk](http://uk-air.defra.gov.uk), 0800 55 66 77 (recorded information)).

- If you're going out, take everything you need with you, including a bottle of water, hat and sunscreen.

## **Steps to take around the house**

- If it's cooler indoors than outdoors, then stay inside. You can help keep your rooms cooler by closing the windows and pulling the curtains to keep the heat out.
- Buy a good quality electric fan. Make sure it's positioned in a safe place with no trailing wires. Fans can sometimes cause dehydration, so don't point it directly at you and regularly drink water.
- Turn off non-essential lights and electrical equipment that you're not using as they can generate heat.
- If it's still very hot at home, try going to your local library, cinema or other air-conditioned place.
- If your home is uncomfortably hot, you could contact your local council's environmental

health department and ask them to carry out a home hazard assessment.

## **Sunlight and vitamin D**

Some exposure to sunlight is essential to the production of vitamin D, which we need for healthy bones, teeth and muscles. We get most of our vitamin D from sunlight exposure from around late March/early April to the end of September.

- Unless the weather is extremely hot, try to go out in the sun every day for short periods, especially between 11am and 3pm, without sunscreen and with your forearms, hands and lower legs uncovered.
- Take care not to burn. One way to tell if the sun's ultraviolet rays are strong is to look at your shadow. If it's shorter than your height, you need to take care and protect your skin.
- Sitting indoors by a sunny window doesn't help to make vitamin D because UVB rays can't get through glass.

Speak to your GP or a pharmacist if you're concerned you don't get enough exposure to the sun, for example if you're unable to leave the

house. They may recommend other ways to get enough vitamin D, such as supplements.

## **If you're living in a care home**

Your care home should have a plan for dealing with hot weather and heat waves. The plan should include measures like:

- identify residents who are at higher risk of heat-related illness
- have enough fans and make sure there are cool areas that can be maintained at temperatures below 26°C
- install thermometers and check them regularly during the hottest periods
- turn off unnecessary lights and equipment
- reduce internal temperatures through shading and cool the building at night by opening windows
- provide water and ice and distribute drinks regularly
- provide wet towels and cool foot baths

- liaise with GPs about possible changes to residents' medication and when to supply rehydration salts for residents who are on high doses of diuretics.

## **Keep an eye out for worrying symptoms**

Heat exhaustion is where you become very hot and start to lose water or salt from your body. Symptoms can include:

- tiredness and weakness
- feeling and being sick
- a headache
- feeling faint or dizzy
- sweating heavily
- intense thirst
- muscle cramps
- a fast pulse
- a decrease in blood pressure
- urinating less often and having darker urine than usual.

If you have these symptoms, you should go to a cool place, lie down, drink plenty of water and remove any extra layers of clothes. You can also try to cool your skin, for example using wet flannels. If you don't respond to these attempts to cool down within 30 minutes, call 999.

Heatstroke is serious and can develop if heat exhaustion isn't treated. More severe symptoms can include confusion, disorientation, fits and loss of consciousness. Call 999 immediately if anyone shows these symptoms. While waiting for the ambulance, move the person somewhere cool, give them water if they're conscious and shower their skin with cool water or cover them in damp towels.

If you're worried about any health problems or you feel unwell, always contact your GP. You can also contact NHS Direct ([111](tel:111), [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)) who can take the details of your symptoms and advise on what to do next – whether to call 999 immediately, book an appointment with your GP or visit a pharmacist in your own time. It's also a good idea to tell friends, family or a neighbour if you're feeling unwell.

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The sources used to create this publication are available on request. Contact us using the details below.

## **Thank you**

Independent Age would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this information was being developed, and those who reviewed the information for us.

## **What do you think?**

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