

Extreme Heat

Heat kills 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 extreme heat and high humidity, evaporation is slowed and the body must work extra hard to maintain a normal temperature.

Most heat disorders occur because the victim has been overexposed to heat or has over exercised for his or her age and physical condition. Other conditions that can induce heat-related illnesses include stagnant atmospheric conditions and poor air quality.

A prolonged drought can have a serious economic impact on a community. Increased demand for water and electricity may result in shortages of resources. Moreover, food shortages may occur if agricultural production is damaged or destroyed by a loss of crops or livestock.

DANGER ZONES

All areas in the United States are at risk of drought at any time of the year. Drought gripped much of the West and Midwest from 1987 to 1991. The Missouri River Basin and California have experienced extended periods of drought as well.

WHAT IS EXTREME HEAT?

Temperatures that hover 10 degrees or more above the average high temperature for the region and last for several weeks are defined as extreme heat. Humid or muggy conditions, which add to the discomfort of high temperatures, occur when a "dome" of high atmospheric pressure traps hazy, damp air near the ground. Excessively dry and hot conditions can provoke dust storms and low visibility. Droughts occur when a long period passes without substantial rainfall. A heat wave combined with a drought is a very dangerous situation.

HELP YOUR COMMUNITY GET READY

The media can raise awareness about extreme heat and drought by providing important information to the community. Here are some suggestions:

Publish a special section with emergency information on extreme heat. Localize the information by including the phone numbers of local emergency services offices, the American Red Cross, and hospitals.

Interview local physicians about the dangers of sunburn, heat exhaustion, heat stroke, and other possible conditions caused by excessive heat.

During a drought, run a week-long series suggesting ways that individuals can conserve water and energy in their homes and their workplaces.

Interview local officials and representatives of the U.S. Department of Agriculture about special steps farmers can take to establish alternative water supplies for their crops.

Sponsor a "Helping Your Neighbors" program through your local school system to encourage children to think of those persons who require special assistance such as elderly people, infants or people with disabilities during severe weather conditions.

DID YOU KNOW...

In a normal year, approximately 175 Americans die from extreme heat. Young children, elderly people, and those who are sick or overweight are more likely to become victims.

Between 1936 and 1975, nearly 20,000 people succumbed to the effects of heat and solar radiation.

Because men sweat more than women, men are more susceptible to heat illness because they become more quickly dehydrated.

Sunburn can significantly slow the skin's ability to release excess heat.

People living in urban areas may be at a greater risk from the effects of a prolonged heat wave than people living in rural regions. An increased health problem can occur when stagnant atmospheric conditions trap pollutants in urban areas, thus adding contaminated air to excessively hot temperatures.