

Summer Heat and the Elderly

Kate Cole Fallon, MS, LCPC, Caregiver Advocate

Summers are short in Maine but each year we typically experience days of extreme heat. Although we may embrace the summer months when they finally arrive, there are precautions we must take to protect our more vulnerable family members from the dangers associated with being overheated.

For all of us, it is vital to stay hydrated when the weather is hot. Be sure your older family members are taking in additional fluid in hot weather. Although it may lead to a need for more restroom stops, it is crucial to replace the fluids lost from perspiring. Don't wait until someone is thirsty to start hydrating and avoid liquids that contain caffeine, alcohol or high amounts of sugar. Dehydration in people with dementia can also significantly increase confusion.

Some medications may contribute to issues in summer weather. Read precautions on all medications. Some need to stay in a cool place to retain effectiveness. Others may cause more vulnerability to sun exposure and increase the chances of sunburn. Read inserts and be aware of guidelines regarding temperature and sun. Some medications also lead to fluid loss so it's important to ask a health care provider when to increase fluid intake.

Aging can also compromise our bodies' ability to adapt to the changes caused by heat. Extreme heat can lead to serious illness. Heat stroke occurs when the body loses its ability to regulate its own temperature. The body fails to sweat and body temperature can increase quickly. Heat exhaustion, on the other hand, may lead to excessive sweating. Both are associated with a variety of other symptoms including nausea, dizziness and confusion. These are all warning signs that someone needs help.

Monitor your older loved one closely on hotter days. Stay out of the midday sun. It's best to wear light weight, loose fitting clothing. If you don't have an air conditioner, make use of fans or if possible, take yourselves to an air conditioned place like a mall, library, supermarket or movie for some relief. Cool showers or sponge baths, damp cloths and water in spray bottles can provide relief.

Keep in mind whenever someone seems to be behaving oddly or reports not feeling well when the thermometer soars, it's a signal to contact a health care provider. Do what you can to keep your loved ones cool and comfortable but heed the warnings of heat related illness. On those few days when it feels unbearably hot, remember the snow will be flying again soon!