



NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE
Mary T. Bassett, M.D., M.P.H.
Commissioner

2014 HEALTH ADVISORY #11: DISCUSS HEAT HEALTH RISKS WITH VULNERABLE PATIENTS; AT RISK NEW YORK RESIDENTS CAN APPLY FOR A FREE AIR CONDITIONER

May 14, 2014

- **Seniors, people with chronic physical health conditions or psychiatric disease, those taking medications that can impair thermoregulation, and those who drink alcohol heavily or use drugs are at increased risk of heat-related illness.**
- **Air conditioning is the most important way to protect at-risk patients on hot days.**
- **Encourage low-income patients over 65 years of age and other at-risk individuals to apply for a free air conditioner. Document the patient's risk for heat-related illness in a written statement with the application.**

Dear Colleagues,

As summer approaches, we need your help to prevent heat-related illness among your patients.

Hot weather can cause heat stroke and exacerbate chronic medical conditions, and may lead to severe complications and death. Deadly heat waves affect New York City nearly every year and kill more Americans each year on average than all other natural disasters combined. Air conditioning is the most important way to protect vulnerable individuals on hot days.

A limited amount of funding is now available through the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) for the purchase and installation of an air conditioner. Due to limited funding, additional HEAP benefits are not available for subsidizing utility costs. We urge providers to:

- Encourage at risk patients who may be eligible and without home air conditioning to apply for this benefit or ask their family members to apply on their behalf.
- Advise patients they must meet HEAP income criteria. (For a four-person household, the maximum monthly gross income to qualify is \$4,182.) Patients can visit <https://mybenefits.ny.gov/> or call the NYS HEAP Hotline at 1-800-342-3009 to see if they qualify. For the Hearing Impaired, TTY Phone number: 1-866-875-9975.
- Have patients call 311 for complete information about the program and the application. Patients can also be referred to the NYC Human Resources Administration Infoline at 1-718-557-1399, or 1-929-221-5862.
- Provide a written statement to the patient documenting that he or she is at increased risk for heat-related illness due to a medical or psychiatric condition or takes medication that increases his/her risk.
- Provide guidance about heat health risks and precautions to all vulnerable patients and their caregivers.

Risk Factors for Heat-Related Illness and Death

The rates of serious illness and death from extreme heat exposure are increased among older adults, those with chronic cardiovascular or respiratory disease, diabetes, or obesity, those with serious mental health, cognitive, or developmental disorders that impair judgment or self-care, those taking medications that can impair thermoregulation,ⁱ and those who use illicit drugs or drink heavily.

Hyperthermia victims are most often overcome by heat in their own homes, frequently live alone, and do not have fully working air conditioners or may only have fans, which do not provide sufficient cooling during extremely hot weather. Fans should only be used when the air conditioning is on or windows are open, and are best to use at night to bring in cooler air from outside.

Prevent Heat-Related Illness and Death

- Be alert to the signs and symptoms of heat-related illness or exacerbation of chronic medical conditions such as heart disease.
- Provide anticipatory guidance to patients and caregivers at visits prior to and during the summer season.
 - Advise at-risk patients to use their air conditioner or go to a place with air conditioning. **To find a cooling center in New York City during heat waves, call 311 or go to www.nyc.gov/oem.**
 - For air conditioners with a thermostat, a setting no lower than 78°F is recommended to provide comfort while not wasting energy.
 - Give recommendations to patients with health conditions or who take medications that can interfere with fluid balance or thermoregulation about self-monitoring (e.g. using bodyweight measurement to monitor hydration).
- Engage caregivers, family members and support networks to frequently check on at-risk patients and to assist them in staying cool and well hydrated.
- For more information on heat illness, visit www.nyc.gov/health/heat.
- The NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene reminds all health care providers to report deaths where heat exposure is suspected as the direct cause or a contributing factor to the NYC Office of the Chief Medical Examiner at 212-447-2030 immediately.

Thank you for your continued dedication and contribution to the health of New Yorkers.

Sincerely,

Thomas Matte

Thomas Matte, MD, MPH
Assistant Commissioner,
Bureau of Environmental Surveillance and Policy

Nancy Clark

Nancy Clark, MA, CIH, CSP
Assistant Commissioner,
Bureau of Environmental Disease and
Injury Prevention

ⁱ Hajat S, O'Connor M, Kosatsky T. 2010. Health effects of hot weather: from awareness of risk factors to effective health protection. *Lancet*. 375:856-63