



NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF  
HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE  
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*Commissioner*

## **2015 Health Advisory #7: Prevent Heat-Related Illness and Death Among At-Risk Patients**

Please distribute this Health Advisory to all clinical staff in the Departments of Emergency Medicine, Family Medicine, Geriatrics, Internal Medicine, Psychiatry, Pharmacy and Primary Care.  
Please also share with your non-hospital based colleagues.

May 8, 2015

- **Identify patients at increased risk for heat-related illness.**
- **Instruct at-risk patients to stay well-hydrated and use home air conditioners or go to air-conditioned places during hot weather, especially during heat waves.**
- **Encourage low-income patients over 65 years of age and other at-risk individuals to apply for a free air conditioner.**
- **Encourage caregivers to help at-risk patients stay cool and well-hydrated.**

Dear Colleagues,

With the arrival of summer, we need your continued help to prevent heat-related illness (hyperthermia) by identifying at-risk patients, and providing them and their caregivers with anticipatory guidance about heat-health risks and precautions.

Hot weather can cause heat stroke and exacerbate chronic medical conditions, and may lead to severe complications and death. Heat waves affect New York City nearly every year and kill more New Yorkers each year on average than all other natural disasters combined. Air conditioning is the most effective protection for at-risk patients during extreme heat.

### **Cooling Assistance**

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, HEAP benefits are not available for subsidizing utility costs. We urge providers to:

- Encourage at-risk patients without home air conditioning who meet income eligibility criteria to apply for funding from the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) to purchase and install air conditioners. Patients can visit <https://mybenefits.ny.gov/> or call the HEAP Hotline at 1-800-342-3009 to see if they qualify.
- Advise patients who qualify to call 311 or the Human Resources Administration at 1-718-557-1399 or 1-212-835-7216 for an application.
- Provide patients with a written statement documenting increased risk for heat-related illness due to a medical or psychiatric condition, or use of medication(s) that increases risk.

### **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, and those who drink heavily or use illicit drugs (see checklist on following page).

Most hyperthermia victims are overcome by heat in their own homes and do not have fully working air conditioners; some victims 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. People who are socially isolated may also be at increased risk.

## Prevent Heat-related Illness and Death

We recommend you provide anticipatory guidance to at-risk patients and their caregivers at visits throughout the summer season:

- Advise at-risk patients to use their air conditioners or go to places with air conditioning on hot days. Cooling centers are made available to New Yorkers during extreme heat events. **To find a cooling center in New York City during a heat wave, call 311 or go to [www.nyc.gov/oem](http://www.nyc.gov/oem).**
  - Suggest setting air conditioners to 78°F to provide comfort while conserving energy.
  - Advise at-risk patients to increase fluid intake during hot weather.
  - Recommend self-monitoring, such as using bodyweight measurement, to monitor hydration for patients with health conditions sensitive to fluid balance or among those using medications that can impair thermoregulation or cause dehydration.<sup>1</sup>
- Engage caregivers, family members and support networks to frequently check on at-risk patients, especially those who cannot care for themselves, to assist them in staying cool and well hydrated before and during hot weather.
- Be alert to the signs and symptoms of heat-related illness or exacerbation of chronic medical conditions. For more information on heat illness, visit [www.nyc.gov/health/heat](http://www.nyc.gov/health/heat).
- Health care providers should immediately 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.

### Checklist: Identifying Patients at At-Risk for Heat Related Illness and Death

- People who do not have or do not use home air conditioning **AND**:
  - Aged  $\geq 65$  years
  - Chronic health conditions including:
    - Cardiovascular, respiratory, or renal disease
    - Obesity (BMI > 30)
    - Diabetes
    - Psychiatric illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder
    - Cognitive or developmental disorder that impairs judgment or self-care
  - Taking medications that can impair thermoregulation including:
    - Diuretics
    - Anticholinergics
    - Neuroleptics
  - Illicit drug or heavy alcohol use
  - Socially isolated or with limited mobility.

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

Sincerely,

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<sup>1</sup> 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.