

2020 Health Alert #19: Help Prevent Heat-Related Illness and Death Among Heat-Vulnerable People During the COVID-19 Pandemic

June 10, 2020

Please distribute to all clinical staff in emergency medicine, family medicine, geriatrics, internal medicine, psychiatry, pharmacy and primary care. Please also share with your colleagues.

- Identify people at increased risk for heat-related illness (see checklist).
- Recognize that many conditions that increase risk for heat-related illness also increase risk for severe COVID-19 illness.
- Be aware that the COVID-19 emergency may also put people at risk for indoor heat exposure because they are staying inside for physical distancing or limiting use of air conditioning due to economic constraints.
- Remind heat-vulnerable people that heat events (heat waves) can be dangerous and instruct them to use air conditioning. If they do not have air conditioning, refer them to air conditioner assistance program.
- Encourage people to pay attention to official government announcements about where they can go to get relief from the heat.
- Instruct heat-vulnerable people to stay well-hydrated.
- Encourage caregivers to help heat-vulnerable people stay cool and well-hydrated.

Air Conditioner Assistance

People without air conditioners can call 311 to apply for a free air conditioner and installation if they qualify. (See “Cooling Assistance” on Page 2 for details.)

Identifying People at Risk for Heat-Related Illness and Death

- People who do not have or use air conditioning and have one or more of the following risk factors*:
 - Chronic health conditions including:
 - Cardiovascular, respiratory or renal disease
 - Obesity (BMI > 30)
 - Diabetes
 - Serious mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder
 - Cognitive or developmental disorder that impairs judgment or self-care, such as dementia
 - Have difficulty thermoregulating or use medications that can impair thermoregulation, including:
 - Diuretics
 - Anticholinergics
 - Neuroleptics
 - Drug or alcohol misuse
 - Socially isolated or with limited mobility

**Black New Yorkers and older adults (age ≥ 60) are more likely to have a combination of these risk factors due in part to social and economic disparities that*

Dear Colleagues,

As hot weather arrives, you can provide guidance on heat-health impacts and preventive measures to people who have an elevated risk for heat-related illness and their caregivers. This summer, the risk of COVID-19 transmission must be balanced against the risk of heat-related illness. With COVID-19 physical distancing measures, we are recommending that people — especially those most at risk of COVID-19 complications and heat-related illness — stay home as much as possible. However, during hot weather, staying in homes without air conditioning can increase risk for heat-related death or illness. You can help people mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission and the risk of heat-related illness by reminding them of the health risks of extreme heat (heat waves) and encouraging them to plan how to find relief from the heat.

Heat waves and extreme heat events kill more New Yorkers, on average, than any other extreme weather. Hot weather can cause hyperthermia or exacerbate chronic medical conditions. Both heat and COVID-19 inequitably impact communities of color.

Most hyperthermia victims are overcome by heat in their homes and do not have or use air conditioners. Electric fans do not provide sufficient cooling during extremely hot weather. Air conditioning is the most effective protection during a heat wave but owning and using air conditioners can be cost-prohibitive. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 10% of households citywide and up to 30% in low-income communities lacked air conditioners.

This year, ownership and use of air conditioners may decline with rising unemployment. To address this need, **New York City is providing air conditioners to approximately 74,000 low-income households with a resident who is 60 years or older without air conditioning at home.** New York City agency case managers are identifying and directly reaching out to income-eligible New Yorkers.

Use the checklist on page 1 to identify heat-vulnerable people and provide the following guidance.

Guidance for heat-vulnerable people

- Remind people that heat events (heat waves) are not just uncomfortable but can be dangerous. Encourage them to monitor weather alerts and make sure they have a plan for cooling relief during extreme heat.

Cooling Assistance Program

From May 1 to August 30, 2020, people who meet income and other criteria can apply for funds from the New York State Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) to purchase and install an air conditioner. Applications can be printed or will be mailed to the person. Completed applications must be mailed to NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA). All HRA offices are closed. *At this time, HEAP funds cannot be used to pay electric utility costs.*

We urge you to:

- ✓ Encourage heat-vulnerable people without air conditioners to call **311** to ask for a HEAP air conditioner application.
- ✓ Provide people with the required written documentation of increased risk for heat-related illness due to a medical or psychiatric condition or use of medications that increases risk.

- Encourage people to use their air conditioners. Suggest setting air conditioners to 78 degrees or “low” cool to provide comfort, save on electricity costs, and conserve energy.
- If they do not have air conditioning, encourage people to apply for one through the Home Energy Assistance Program (see “Cooling Assistance Program” box on page 2). Guide people without air conditioning to consider family, friends or neighbors they can visit even for a couple of hours to get cool *during a heat wave*. Instruct people not to visit others if they have symptoms of COVID-19 or tested positive for COVID-19 until their isolation period has ended; to confirm no one in the household they will be visiting is sick or isolating for COVID-19, or at high risk for severe COVID-19 illness; and stay at least 6 feet apart from non-household members and wear a [face covering](#) if unable to do so. Encourage them to pay attention to public messaging around other alternative cooling spaces available from the City.
- Advise people to increase fluid intake during hot weather.
- Recommend self-monitoring of hydration, such as body weight measurement, for people who have health conditions sensitive to fluid balance or use medications that can impair thermoregulation or cause dehydration.
- Engage caregivers and other support networks to frequently call or otherwise remotely check on heat-vulnerable people to help them stay cool and well-hydrated before and during hot weather.
- Discuss with people and caregivers the signs and symptoms of heat-related illness or exacerbation of chronic medical conditions and provide guidance about when to call 911 or go to an emergency room. For more information, visit nyc.gov/health/heat.

Immediately report deaths where heat exposure is suspected as a direct or contributing cause to the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner at **212-447-2030**.

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

Sincerely,

Carolyn Olson

Carolyn Olson, MPH
Assistant Commissioner
Bureau of Environmental Surveillance and Policy

Amita Toprani

Amita Toprani, MD, MPH
Medical Director
Bureau of Environmental Disease and Injury
Prevention