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Extreme Heat & Health

Attention: Physicians, Hospitals, ER Manager, ER Physician, Community Health Centres, Walk-In Urgent Care Clinic, Nurse Practitioner, Ontario Health, Ontario Health Teams, Midwives, Family Health Team, Indigenous Healthcare & Community, Long-Term Care Homes, Retirement Homes, Paramedic Services, Pharmacy

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Extreme heat is a growing public health concern worldwide, including in Simcoe County and the District of Muskoka. These events can lead to serious but preventable illness and death, particularly among people at increased risk. Two extreme heat events have already occurred this summer, and additional events are expected. Heat-related illnesses typically increase during these events and can place pressure on local health services. Since June 8, regional emergency department saw approximately 42 patients for heat-related illnesses.

1.0 Identifying Patients at Risk

Consider the following when assessing a patient's risk of heat-related illness:

- Age extremes: infants and young children, and older adults/seniors
- Chronic conditions: cardiovascular, renal, pulmonary, and psychiatric illness; reduced mobility or bedbound status
- Pregnancy
- Social factors: social isolation, homelessness or marginal housing, low income
- Occupational or activity-related exposure: outdoor workers and athletes
- [Medications](#) that increase heat-related risk

Rapid risk-assessment tools are available in the links below:

- [NCCEH Rapid Risk Assessment Checklist for Extreme Heat](#)
- [U.S. CDC HEAT Questionnaire](#)

2.0 Recognizing Heat Stress and Heat Stroke

Heat-related illness exists on a spectrum. Heat stroke is a medical emergency requiring immediate cooling. Ensure your patients are aware of signs of heat-related illness and know to seek help if they appear.

Mild to moderate heat related illness:

- Headache, nausea or irritability
- Weakness, tiredness, feeling unwell, light-headedness or dizziness
- Extreme thirst, peeing less than usual or dark yellow pee
- Skin rash, muscles, or very warm, sweaty skin

View all current Public Health Alerts by visiting the Health Professional Resources page at:
www.smdhu.org/PHA

Receive urgent public health updates by email (such as Public Health Alert) by subscribing at: www.smdhu.org/PHAlert

Severe heat related illness (Call 911 right away)

- Loss of consciousness or hard to wake up
- Confusion, disorientation, trouble speaking or movement problems
- Not sweating, hot, flushed skin, or pale skin
- Not urinating or only very small amounts
- Fast breathing or fast heartbeat
- Body temperature over 39°C

Infants and young children may not show the typical early signs and symptoms of heat-related illness. In these patients, watch for:

- Unusual irritability or lethargy
- Fewer wet diapers than usual, dry mouth, or sunken fontanelle (signs of dehydration)
- Hot, flushed, or dry skin; rapid breathing or rapid heart rate
- Vomiting

Any of the above during a heat event warrant seeking immediate medical attention.

3.0 Extreme Heat Prevention and Counselling

[Federal guidance from Health Canada](#) now recommends an upper indoor temperature limit of 26°C to protect older adults (aged 60 and over) from heat-related illness and death. When counselling patients, advise them to seek out indoor spaces at or below this threshold where possible, especially during prolonged heat events.

Vulnerable clients on Ontario Works and/or Ontario Disability can access cooling devices through Discretionary Benefits. Eligibility requirements and restrictions are outlined in this [OW and ODSP Discretionary Benefits and Cooling Devices](#) resource developed by the [Canadian Environmental Law Association](#)

Patient counselling and prevention during extreme heat events:

- Increase water intake; avoid alcohol and excess caffeine
- Stay in air-conditioned spaces where possible; if home is not air-conditioned, plan visits to cooling centres, shopping centres, or public libraries
- Wear light-coloured, loose-fitting clothing; limit strenuous outdoor activity during peak heat
- Never leave infants, children, or pets in a parked vehicle
- Check on patients, neighbours, and family members who live alone, especially those who are older or have chronic illness

Additional health care professional resources related to extreme heat can be accessed at our [Health Professionals Portal](#).