Heat health management in residential aged and disability care facilities

# Heatwaves and health

In the last 150 years, heatwaves (also called extreme heat) have caused more deaths in Australia than all other natural disasters combined, including bushfires, floods and storms.

Many of these deaths are preventable.

In the Northern Territory, heatwave conditions occur between the months of October and March.

# Who is at risk?

Everyone is potentially at risk during extremely hot weather. Even the most acclimatised NT residents can be affected by heat stress, with an increased body temperature having the potential to cause serious or even fatal affects. The most dangerous heat illness are heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Heat stroke is a medical emergency.

NT Health has published information on [heat stress](https://nt.gov.au/wellbeing/health-conditions-treatments/heat-stress). Use this information to learn about the signs of heat illness.

Many of those at high risk reside in aged care and disability care facilities. These include:

* older people, particularly the frail or over 65
* people with a serious chronic condition (heart, breathing problems, diabetes, serious mental illness, or those who are very overweight)
* people with dementia or Alzheimer’s disease
* people taking medications that interfere with the body's ability to regulate temperature
* people who have difficulty keeping cool (for example, those with a physical disability)
* a person with a high temperature from an existing infection
* anyone confined to bed.

It is very important that those at high risk have extra care during a heatwave.

# How will my organisation know a heatwave is coming?

Many factors come into play when defining a heatwave. These include:

* the maximum and minimum daily forecast temperatures
* the temperature in recent weeks
* the number of forecast hot days in the immediate future.

The Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) publishes heatwave forecasts on their website, app and social media channels. The forecasts are republished by Secure NT on their [website](https://securent.nt.gov.au/alerts-warnings) and social media channels.

NT Health use the heatwave forecasts issued by Bureau of Meteorology to warn the community of heat health risks. NT Health will publish heat health alerts on the department’s health alerts website, social media sites, and Secure NT. Radio is also used to inform the public of extreme Heatwaves. NT Health will email health services when extreme heat is forecast.

You should enact your organisation's heatwave action plan (see template on page 8) once you receive a heat alert from NT Health or learn of a severe or extreme heatwave from BoM.

It is possible a heatwave will happen at the same time as a bushfire. If this occurs, you will also need to enact your bushfire action plan. These plans may have considerable overlap.

# Checklist: Get prepared

Planning ahead and being prepared for extreme heat is important. Your organisation can do several things to prepare for hot weather. The following checklist will help with getting prepared for extreme heat.

## Policy procedures and protocols

* Does your organisation have a heatwave management policy? (see template on page 6)
* Does your organisation have a heatwave action plan? (see template on page 8)
* Does your organisation have a protocol to consult with GPs and pharmacists about the use of prescribed medications for residents during periods of extreme heat?
* Does your organisation have measures in place to deal with potential power outages during periods of extreme heat?
* Does your organisation have a protocol for monitoring the indoor temperature of all rooms in the facility?
* Does your organisation have a protocol in place to ensure increased availability and supply of cool drinks for residents, staff and visitors during a heatwave?
* Does your organisation have plans in place for safe storage of food, drinks and medication in the event of a power failure during periods of extreme heat?

## Resident needs

* Does your organisation have processes in place for proactively assessing a resident’s health care needs in preparation for hot weather?
* Have you identified residents taking medications that increase the risk of heat stress (for example, psychotropics and cardiovascular medications)?
* Do residents at high risk have a relevant care plan to manage their needs during extreme heat?
* Has your organisation developed a hot weather menu for residents that allows for flexibility and adaptation during periods of extreme heat?
* Does each resident have an adequate supply of light, loose-fitting cotton clothing to wear in hot weather?

## Staff needs

* Are staff trained and available to manage extreme heat events?
* Are staff trained in recognising the signs of heat illness and the policies regarding referral for health care?
* Is preparation for heatwaves covered in staff inductions, including relevant training on the use of air-conditioners, fans, refrigerators and freezers?
* Have all staff attended training so they are skilled to perform their duties in extreme heat?
* Does your organisation have plans in place to ensure sufficient staff are available during periods of extreme heat?
* Does your organisation have plans in place that cater for staff fatigue in periods of extreme heat?

## Environment

* Is the facility designed to provide a cool environment in the residents’ rooms and in all communal living areas?
* Has your organisation completed an assessment of the facility to determine how buildings will remain cool in periods of extreme heat? Consider shade, air-conditioning, power supply, water cooling and insulation.
* Has a part of the facility been identified that could be used as a cool shelter in the event of power loss?
* Can all windows be shaded on the inside and outside of the building? Can windows in the facility be opened (where it is safe to do so)?

## Equipment, services and supplies

* Does your organisation have the necessary technical and support service resources to manage in a heatwave?
* Are there sufficient air-conditioning units to properly provide a cool environment in all parts of the facility, including common rooms and resident bedrooms?
* Is there a plan in place to maintain air-conditioning units across the facility?
* Are fans in use across the facility? Are there sufficient test and tag procedures in place?
* Is there a plan in place to maintain all refrigerators and freezers across the facility?
* Does your organisation have access to thermometers to allow regular monitoring of air temperature around the facility?

# Checklist: During a heatwave

The following checklist will help residents and staff in the facility to cope during periods of extreme heat.

## Policy procedures and protocols

* Has the heatwave action plan been enacted?

## Resident needs

* Does your organisation have plans in place to regularly monitor residents’ health during a heatwave?
* Is resident comfort being monitored regularly by ensuring room temperature is appropriate and loose-fitting, cotton clothing is worn?
* Does your organisation have protocols to provide residents with adequate fluids during a heatwave?
* Do high risk residents (for example, those taking medications that can increase the risk of heat-related illness or those with a current infection) have a care plan?
* Are residents being encouraged to avoid caffeinated drinks?
* Is resident movement and activity monitored to reduce outdoor exposure, including the use of entry and exit points to outside environments?

## Staff needs

* Do staff know signs of heat illness?
* Do staff have access to cool drinks and rest breaks?

## Environment

* Are all bedrooms and common areas regularly monitored for temperature?
* Have windows been shaded both inside and outside (if applicable)?
* Is the identified cool shelter available and ready to use?

## Equipment, services and supplies

* Are all refrigerators and freezers being regularly monitored for function and temperature?

# Checklist: After a heatwave

The following checklist will help residents and staff recover once the period of extreme heat has passed.

## Policy procedures and protocols

* Does your organisation have plans to debrief and reflect on what would be done differently next time? Consider what went well and what didn’t go so well.

## Resident needs

* Are residents being monitored for signs of heat illness for some time after the heat has passed?
* Have medications and other care needs been reviewed?

## Staff needs

* Are staff being monitored for signs of heat illness for some time after the heat has passed?
* Have staff been included in the debrief process?

## Environment

* Can blinds be raised and windows opened if it is safe to do so?

## Equipment, services and supplies

* Are all bedrooms and common rooms regularly monitored for temperature for some time after the heatwave has passed?

# Template: Sample heatwave management policy

{Remove this section once your policy is complete}

The following template is a starting point to create a heatwave management policy for your organisation. It can be changed as needed to suit your specific needs.

Included in each section are prompts to {insert} information. Simply replace the bracketed words with the information requested. Some sections give prompts to {remove/add/delete as applicable}.

After you have developed your policy, it is a good idea to circulate it to employees for comment. You could do this through your employee intranet site, email distribution list or written memo. Remember to include employees who do not have regular access to internet and email (for example, maintenance employees).

You may also consider circulating this to residents and volunteers for feedback.

Once the policy is finalised and signed off by senior management, all residents and employees should receive a copy. The policy should also be included in any orientation material that is given to new residents and employees. Alternatively, a simplified version of the policy could be provided to residents and family.

Heatwave management policy for **{Insert Facility Name)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Background** | **Mission statement** |
| Heatwaves can pose health risks to people. The specific groups of people more vulnerable to effects of heatwaves, include:* older people
* people with a disability or chronic illness
* people taking certain medications.

Residents of aged care facilities are likely to fall into these categories (delete as appropriate). | **{Insert facility name}** will provide residents, employees, volunteers and visitors with a safe and healthy environment in which to live, work and visit. |
| **Objectives and strategies** |
| **{Insert facility name}** will: **{add and delete as appropriate}*** minimise the risk of heat stress to residents, employees, volunteers and visitors
* activate the heatwave incident action plan when a heat health alert is received from the Department of Health
* implement the procedure listed in this policy.
 |
| **Responsibility and accountability** |
| This policy applies to all residents, employees, volunteers and visitors to **{insert facility name}.** |
| **Procedure** |
| When a heatwave warning or heat health alert is received, employees and volunteers (where appropriate) activate the Heatwave Incident Action Plan. |
| Communication |
| **{Insert facility name}** will ensure that {add and delete as appropriate}:* all residents, employees and volunteers {receive a copy of this policy/are aware of this policy}
* this policy is easy to find
* residents, employees and volunteers are informed when a particular activity aligns with this policy
* residents, employees and volunteers can actively contribute and provide feedback to this policy
* residents, employees and volunteers are notified of all changes to this policy.
 |
| Monitoring and review |
| **{Insert facility name}** will review this policy {six/twelve} months after implementation and then every year. Effectiveness of the policy will be assessed through:* feedback from residents, employees, volunteers and visitors
* review of the policy by management to determine if all objectives have been met.
 |
| Name: {e.g. Care Coordinator} | Manager: {e.g. CEO, General Manager} |
| Signature: | Signature: |
| Date: | Date: |
|

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Version 0.A* | *Date of next review: xx/xx/xxxx* |

 |

# Template: Heatwave incident action plan

{Remove this section once your action plan is complete}

The following table outlines a sample action plan for your organisation when a heat health alert is issued. Modify this template to suit your needs.

A range of stakeholders may be affected in this action plan, and you will need to determine:

* who they are
* what action needs to happen
* who is responsible for implementing the action
* when they need to do it.

Example stakeholder groups and appropriate actions are listed below.

Heatwave incident action plan for **{Insert Facility Name)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Who is affected? | What is the action? | Who is responsible? | When does it happen? | Completed? |
| All | * Manager to notify all staff when notified of heatwave
 | * Manager
 | * When notified of heatwave
 |  |
| * Heatwave resources circulated to staff
 | * Clinical Nurse Manager
 | * When notification received by the Manager
 |  |
| * Appropriate signage placed at reception alerting staff and volunteers of forecast heatwave alert and appropriate actions
 | * Receptionist
 | * When notification received by the Manager
 |  |
| Residents | * Monitor residents for heat illness
* Commence medication care plans for high risk residents
* Commence fluid balance charts for high risk residents
* Ensure residents are wearing loose-fitting cotton clothing
* Reduce or restrict outdoor exposure for all residents
* Monitor storage of medications sensitive to heat
 | * Nursing staff
 | * During heatwave
 |  |
| * Provide access to additional cool drinks or icy poles
* Encourage residents to avoid caffeinated drinks
 | * Nursing staff
* Catering staff
 | * During heatwave
 |  |
| Staff | * Monitor staff for heat illness
* Offer staff extra cool drinks and rest breaks
 | * Nursing mangers
 | * During heatwave
 |  |
| * Monitor temperature in all bedrooms and common areas
* Close internal blinds where appropriate
 | * Nursing staff
* Facilities personnel
 | * During heatwave
 |  |
| * Close external blinds where appropriate
* Check all air-conditioning units are working to specific temperature
* Monitor refrigerators and freezers regularly for function and temperature
* Ensure the identified cool shelter is available and ready to use
 | * Facilities/maintenance personnel
 | * During heatwave
 |  |

# Template: Heatwave signage

{Remove this section once your signage is complete}

While all residents, staff, volunteers and visitors will clearly recognise the weather is hot, it is still important to alert them a heatwave is in progress.

The following sign can be printed and placed at reception or any area of high traffic.

