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| Heat Health Preparedness Guidance  |
| Health and Community Services – November 2022 |
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Contents

[Introduction 1](#_Toc120640998)

[Purpose 2](#_Toc120640999)

[Audience 2](#_Toc120641000)

[Heat warning systems 3](#_Toc120641001)

[Bureau of Meteorology heatwave warnings 3](#_Toc120641002)

[Chief Health Officer’s Health alert: heat health warnings 3](#_Toc120641003)

[Vic Emergency platform 3](#_Toc120641004)

[Preparedness guidance 3](#_Toc120641005)

[Further information 5](#_Toc120641006)

[Extreme heat and heatwaves 5](#_Toc120641007)

[Heatwave and heat health warnings 5](#_Toc120641008)

[Emergency Respite 5](#_Toc120641009)

[Fires 6](#_Toc120641010)

[Appendix 1: At-risk population groups 7](#_Toc120641011)

[Appendix 2: Self-assessment checklist for hospitals 9](#_Toc120641012)

[Appendix 3: Guidance for primary health care services 11](#_Toc120641013)

[Appendix 4: Guidance for community service organisations 14](#_Toc120641014)

[Appendix 5: Guidance for mental health services 17](#_Toc120641015)

# Introduction

Victoria's climate has changed in the past 100 years by becoming more than 1.0°C warmer and the number of unusually hot days has almost tripled.[[1]](#footnote-2) Victorian climate projections indicate that these trends will continue, with estimates of a further doubling of the number of very hot days and warming of up to 2.4°C by 2050.1

Extreme heat and heatwaves are periods of unusually high maximum and minimum temperatures that could negatively affect human health.[[2]](#footnote-3)

In Australia, extreme heat and heatwaves are a significant cause of morbidity and mortality. Heatwaves have caused more deaths in Australia in the past 100 years than the sum of all other natural hazard events.[[3]](#footnote-4) The seriousness of this effect is often under-appreciated.

Extreme heat and heatwaves can affect health by both directly causing heat-related illness and indirectly by precipitating or exacerbating other medical conditions. Furthermore, some prescribed medications can also increase the risk of heat-related illness or may be less effective or more toxic when stored at high temperatures. These serious heat-related impacts on health and wellbeing are disproportionally born by those most at risk of extreme heat, such as older adults, people of low socioeconomic status, and people with existing chronic or complex health conditions (see Appendix 1).

Extreme heat and heatwaves also affect Victoria’s natural, built and economic environments, often through the compromised operation of critical infrastructure, facilities and services. These can have health consequences (e.g., prolonged loss of electricity can limit access to cooling, and can lead to food spoilage and subsequent gastroenteritis).

Extreme heat and heatwaves place increased demands on health and community services and may require changes to processes to maximise the safety of patients, clients, staff, and community partners. As with all external events that may challenge health and community services, good preparation is essential to minimise risk and ensure a safe and appropriate response.

## Purpose

This guidance aims to help you self-assess your organisation's planning and preparedness to respond to extreme heat and heatwaves. It may assist in identifying gaps in preparedness so that your organisation can develop and implement effective strategies to minimise the effect of extreme heat on your patients, clients, staff and services. <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/residential-aged-care-services-heatwave-ready-resource>

## Audience

This document should be read by staff who work in health and community services in preparation for extreme heat and heatwaves. This includes public and private health services, general practices, community service organisations and mental health services.

It may also assist other organisations that have existing resources, such as:

* aged care facilities who can refer to the [Department of Health’s ready resource](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/residential-aged-care-services-heatwave-ready-resource) <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/residential-aged-care-services-heatwave-ready-resource>>
* sporting organisations who can refer to [Sports Medicine Australia’s Extreme Heat Policy](https://sma.org.au/sma-site-content/uploads/2021/02/SMA-Extreme-Heat-Policy-2021-Final.pdf) <<https://sma.org.au/sma-site-content/uploads/2021/02/SMA-Extreme-Heat-Policy-2021-Final.pdf>>
* organisations with people who work in the heat who can refer to [Safe Work Australia](https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/safety-topic/hazards/working-heat) <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/safety-topic/hazards/working-heat>.

# Heat warning systems

Heat warning systems provide an early notification to organisations and the public of forecast extreme heat or heatwave. When a warning is issued for forecast extreme heat or heatwave, your organisation should prepare in accordance with your heat plans, and monitor the local weather conditions on the [Bureau of Meteorology’s 7-day forecast website](http://www.bom.gov.au/vic/forecasts/map7day.shtml) <www.bom.gov.au/vic/forecasts/map7day.shtml>.

## Bureau of Meteorology heatwave warnings

The Bureau of Meteorology issues heatwave warnings on their public channels when ten per cent or more of a weather district is in a severe or extreme heatwave based on the Excess Heat Factor (EHF). Heatwave warnings will be issued up to four days prior to the event.  The warnings will appear on the Bureau of Meteorology’s [website](http://www.bom.gov.au/australia/heatwave/) <www.bom.gov.au/australia/heatwave/> and [app](http://www.bom.gov.au/app/) <http://www.bom.gov.au/app/>.

The EHF, the metric for heatwaves in Australia, is based on three days of unusually high maximum and minimum temperatures for a location. The EHF categorises heatwave into three levels based on intensity: low-intensity, severe and extreme. The Bureau of Meteorology will issue warnings only for severe and extreme heatwaves.

According to the Bureau of Meteorology, most people are expected to have adequate capacity to cope during low-intensity heatwaves, however, some population groups may still be at-risk of heat-related illness. Severe heatwaves will be even more challenging for at-risk groups, whereas, during an extreme heatwave, everyone is at risk.

In addition to heatwave warnings, the Bureau of Meteorology’s Heatwave Service for Australia also provides heatwave assessments (which identify heatwaves that occurred during the previous days) and heatwave forecasts (which predict those about to occur).

The heatwave warnings, Heatwave Service for Australia and additional information about EHF can be found on the Bureau of Meteorology’s [website](http://www.bom.gov.au/australia/heatwave/) <http://www.bom.gov.au/australia/heatwave/>.

## Chief Health Officer’s Health alert: heat health warnings

To align with the Bureau of Meteorology’s heatwave warnings, the Victorian Department of Health is introducing a new ***Health alert: Heat health warning*** that replaces the Department’s *heat health alerts*. All subscribers of the *Heat Health Alert System* will automatically be transferred to the new *heat health warning* system.

For summer 2022-23, the Chief Health Officer will issue a *heat health warning* to share the Bureau of Meteorology’s heatwave warnings. The Chief Health Officer may issue a *heat health warning* for forecast high temperatures of concern that do not meet the criteria for a Bureau of Meteorology heatwave warning.

You can [subscribe](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/subscribe-to-heat-health-alerts) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/subscribe> to receive *heat health warnings* from the Department of Health.

## Vic Emergency platform

The Bureau of Meteorology’s heatwave warnings, along with preparedness information, will be published on the [Vic Emergency website](https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/) <https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/> and app. You can set up a watch zone to receive warnings for your area through the menu on top right-hand corner of website.

# Preparedness guidance

The Department of Health asks all health and community service organisations and their staff to be mindful of the impact that heat can have on patients and clients, their management and service logistics.

Health and community services should develop clear plans individualised to their service’s operational function and capacity that covers seasonal preparedness, and actions to be taken if extreme heat or a heatwave is forecast. Good preparation is essential to ensure a safe and appropriate response.

Please consider the organisation-specific heat health guidance that is available in the appendices in your organisation’s preparedness planning.

The department has also made available a [Heatwave plan review tool](file:///C%3A/Users/vidpqj9/Downloads/Heatwave%20plan%20review%20tool) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/heatwave-plan-review-tool> which contains templates and tasks to help guide organisations to review and revise their heatwave plans.

# Further information

## Extreme heat and heatwaves

* [Department of Health – Extreme heat and heatwaves](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-and-heatwaves)

<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-and-heatwaves>

* [Department of Health - Planning for extreme heat and heatwaves](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/planning-for-extreme-heat-and-heatwaves)

 <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/planning-for-extreme-heat-and-heatwaves>

* [Department of Health - Heatwave plan review tool](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/heatwave-plan-review-tool) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/heatwave-plan-review-tool>
* [Department of Health – Extreme heat information for clinicians](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-information-for-clinicians) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-information-for-clinicians>
* [Department of Health – Extreme heat community resources](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources>
* [Better Health Channel – How to cope and stay safe in extreme heat](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/how-to-cope-and-stay-safe-in-extreme-heat) <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/how-to-cope-and-stay-safe-in-extreme-heat>
* [Better Health Channel – Heat stress and heat-related illness](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/heat-stress-and-heat-related-illness#prevention-of-heat-related-illness) <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/heat-stress-and-heat-related-illness#prevention-of-heat-related-illness>
* [Better Health Channel – Survive the heat – partner kit](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/survive-heat-media-kit)

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/survive-heat-media-kit>

* [Department of Health – Residential aged care services – heatwave ready resource](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/residential-aged-care-services-heatwave-ready-resource) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/residential-aged-care-services-heatwave-ready-resource>
* [Safe Work Australia – Working in the heat](https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/safety-topic/hazards/working-heat) <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/safety-topic/hazards/working-heat>
* [Sports Medicine Australia – Extreme heat policy](https://sma.org.au/sma-site-content/uploads/2021/02/SMA-Extreme-Heat-Policy-2021-Final.pdf) <https://sma.org.au/sma-site-content/uploads/2021/02/SMA-Extreme-Heat-Policy-2021-Final.pdf>

## Heatwave and heat health warnings

* [Bureau of Meteorology - Heatwave Service](http://www.bom.gov.au/australia/heatwave/) <www.bom.gov.au/australia/heatwave/>
* [Bureau of Meteorology - Climate outlooks](http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/outlooks/#/overview/summary) <www.bom.gov.au/climate/outlooks/#/overview/summary>
* [Department of Health – Subscribe to heat health warnings](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/subscribe) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/subscribe-to-heat-health-alerts>
* [Vic Emergency Platform](https://emergency.vic.gov.au/prepare/#heat-health-alerts) <https://emergency.vic.gov.au/prepare/#heat-health-alerts>

## Emergency Respite

* Carers Victoria 1800 514 845, Carelink 1800 052 222 (business hours) or 1800 059 059 (after-hours).
* Veterans’ Home Care assessment service 1300 550 450 (business hours) (for emergency after-hours respite call Carelink above).
* Annecto Emergency After-Hours Response Service (Victoria) 1800 72 72 80 (5 pm–9 am weekdays, 24 hours on weekends and public holidays). Free short-term personal care, respite crisis management, telephone and in-home support for older people, people with a disability or carers who do not have funded assistance.
* Some local governments may provide respite services.

## Fires

* [Victorian Government – Plan and prepare for fire](https://www.vic.gov.au/plan-and-prepare) <https://www.vic.gov.au/plan-and-prepare>
* [Business Victoria – Plan and prepare for bushfires](https://business.vic.gov.au/business-information/disaster-resilience/deal-with-bushfires/plan-and-prepare-for-bushfires) <https://business.vic.gov.au/business-information/disaster-resilience/deal-with-bushfires/plan-and-prepare-for-bushfires>
* [Department of Health – Emergency preparedness in residential aged care services – natural hazards](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/residential-aged-care/emergency-preparedness-in-residential-aged-care-services-natural-hazards) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/residential-aged-care/emergency-preparedness-in-residential-aged-care-services-natural-hazards>
* [Department of Health – Bushfires and public health](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/bushfires-and-public-health) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/bushfires-and-public-health>

# Appendix 1: At-risk population groups

Extreme heat and heatwaves can affect anyone. Some people are more susceptible to its effects due to factors such as their age, health, environment, social and economic circumstances, location or occupation. The following population groups are likely to be most affected by heat. While these groups are not in any specific order, belonging to more than one at-risk group may further increase susceptibility to heat.

### People of a certain age or life stage

* Over 65 years old, especially those living alone
* Pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers
* Babies and young children

### People with particular health conditions

* Heart and lung disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer or kidney disease
* Certain neurological illnesses (e.g., Parkinson’s Disease, Multiple Sclerosis)
* Mental illness
* Illness or infection that causes dehydration or fever
* Conditions that impair sweating including dehydration, skin disorders (e.g., sunburn, prickly heat and extensive scarring from burns), cystic fibrosis, quadriplegia and scleroderma
* Problematic alcohol or other drug use (e.g., amphetamines)
* Cognitive impairments limiting the ability to identify or communicate their discomfort or need for water
* Limited mobility (e.g., those who are bed-bound or in a wheelchair)
* Overweight or obesity
* Low cardiovascular fitness

### People taking medications that may affect the way the body reacts to heat

* Allergy medicines (antihistamines)
* Some blood pressure and heart medicines (beta-blockers and vasoconstrictors)
* Seizure medicines (anticonvulsants)
* Thyroid medications (thyroxine)
* Water pills (diuretics)
* Antidepressants and antipsychotics

### People with particular social and economic circumstances

* Sleeping rough or in poor quality homes
* Low socioeconomic status who may restrict use of, or have limited access to, air-conditioning
* Living alone or who are socially isolated
* Non-English-speaking people who may not be able to understand heat alerts and warnings or have reduced access to appropriate health or support services

### People outdoors during extreme heat

* Working or being physically active outdoors (e.g., gardeners, athletes and labourers).

# Appendix 2: Self-assessment checklist for hospitals

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| --- | --- |
| **Considerations for your extreme heat and heatwave plan**  | **Y/N** |
| Does your hospital have an extreme heat plan? |  |
| Are relevant staff aware of your plan, how to access it and what it contains? |  |
| Has your plan been reviewed since the last summer season? Date of last review: |  |
| Is it integrated with your hospital’s external emergency and disaster response plan? |  |
| Is there an emergency department/urgent care centre sub-plan? |  |
| Is there a clear escalation protocol to notify executive team members of extreme heat/heatwaves, disruptions to service delivery and criteria to request activation of a Code Brown response? |  |
| Does your business continuity plan link to your extreme heat plan? |  |
| Does your heat plan specify how you will monitor the forecast for extreme heat or heatwave conditions? (i.e., Bureau of Meteorology heatwave warnings, VIC Emergency platform or Department of Health heat health warnings) |  |
| Does your extreme heat plan specify actions for a forecast single day of extreme heat? |  |
| Does your extreme heat plan specify actions for a forecast multi-day heatwave? |  |
| **Considerations for patient care in your extreme heat plan** | **Y/N** |
| Does it address increasing inpatient bed capacity during extreme heat and heatwave conditions? |  |
| Do discharge planning considerations for at-risk patients include weather conditions such as extreme heat and heatwave? (e.g., consider providing taxi vouchers, discharging patients during cooler times of the day)  |  |
| Does it address switching outpatient appointments to telehealth where possible? |  |
| Does it consider advising on medication review for at-risk patients?  |  |
| **Considerations for staff in your extreme heat plan** | **Y/N** |
| Does it cover advice for all staff to keep themselves safe (e.g., hydration, regular breaks, travel to and from work?) |  |
| Are staff trained to recognise at-risk patients and the management of heat-related illness? |  |
| Does it have arrangements to consider increasing staffing during forecast extreme heat or heatwaves, and on the days that follow? |  |
| **Considerations for power outages in your extreme heat plan** | **Y/N** |
| Do you have a plan/s for an alternate power supply in the event of a power outage? |  |
| Do you have a plan/s for failure of air-conditioning? |  |
| **Additional considerations for emergency department/urgent care centre subplans** | **Y/N** |
| Does the subplan consider increasing capacity to treat emergency patients (e.g., by using other areas such as outpatient clinics)? |  |
| Does it consider access to hydration and cooling (e.g., a water station, fans, air-conditioning) for patients and visitors, including in the waiting room and in ambulance ramping areas?  |  |
| Does it cover the health and safety of community partners (e.g., Ambulance Victoria and police)? |  |

# Appendix 3: Guidance for primary health care services

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service providers, seek local knowledge and input from Elders to create culturally safe and accessible services to assist community members experiencing heat-related illness.

### Reacquaint yourself and staff to heat health

* Understand the mechanisms of heat illnesses, clinical manifestations, diagnosis and treatment.
* Recognise the early signs of heat-related illness, including heatstroke which is a medical emergency.
* Be aware of how to initiate proper cooling and resuscitative measures.
* Be aware of the risk factors in heat-related illness (Appendix 1).
* Consider holding a team meeting prior to summer to increase staff awareness and to conduct any training related to heat and the health of both staff and patients.

### Prepare the workforce

* Remind staff how to look after themselves during extreme heat and heatwaves (e.g., provide advice on staying hydrated, advice to stay cool while travelling to and from work, and encourage regular breaks).
* Plan for staff shortages during periods of extreme heat and heatwaves, and increased demand for services, including on the days that follow the heat.
* Consider holding team meetings to discuss the clinic’s response to heat, develop a written policy, and review the clinic’s triage policy.
* Plan to hold an evaluation meeting with staff after an extreme heat event or heatwave to discuss how they dealt with it, what went well, and what could be improved. Considering using the RACGP ‘plan, do, study, act’ (PDSA) quality improvement cycle and the [Department of Health’s heatwave review tool](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/heatwave-plan-review-tool) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/heatwave-plan-review-tool> in your evaluation.

### Prepare at-risk patients and their carers

When seeing patients who may be at risk of heat-related illness, clinicians can take the opportunity to [provide education, assess supports and optimise medical management](https://www1.racgp.org.au/ajgp/2018/december/preventing-heat-related-disease-in-general-practic) <https://www1.racgp.org.au/ajgp/2018/december/preventing-heat-related-disease-in-general-practic>. This includes:

* Provide up-to-date [heat health take-home resources for patients and their carers which are available from the department’s website](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources> (Note that these are available in a range of community languages).
* Be aware of the potential side effects of medicines and consider optimal dosing during periods of hot weather. Advise patients how to store and take medication during the heat.
* Consider including heat advice and a pre-summer medical assessment into routine care and care plans for at-risk people.
* Advise patients on drinking recommendations appropriate to their health status, particularly those who have a decreased perception of thirst. Fluids are not just limited to water; they can be icy poles, fruit juice or cordial. Salt tablets, sports drinks or electrolyte-carbohydrate supplements offer no benefits and may be harmful because of high osmotic load. Excessive drinking of pure water can lead to severe hyponatraemia, potentially leading to complications like stroke and death.
* Educate patients to adjust their behaviour to stay cool by planning their day to avoid being outside during the hottest part of the day, reducing excessive clothing, using electric fans, applying damp towels containing ice to the skin, and taking cool showers. If they must leave the house, advise them to also wear a hat and sunscreen.
* Check they have appropriate follow-up and supports in place, including that their care plan contains contact details for their doctor and their other care workers, and there are adequate arrangements for food shopping to reduce having to go outdoors during the heat.
* Reinforce to carers the importance of also caring for themselves, especially during the heat.
* [[Consider the need to optimise the home environment](https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/energy-efficiency-and-reducing-emissions/save-energy-in-the-home/reduce-cooling-costs-at-home/cool-your-home-in-summer)](https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/energy-efficiency-and-reducing-emissions/save-energy-in-the-home/reduce-cooling-costs-at-home/cool-your-home-in-summer) <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/energy-efficiency-and-reducing-emissions/save-energy-in-the-home/reduce-cooling-costs-at-home/cool-your-home-in-summer> (e.g., appropriate home temperature, cooling options, knowing which room is the coolest room of the house, window shading and ventilation). If patients can’t cool their homes, advise them to spend time in an air-conditioned public space during the heat, including any public heat refuges provided by the local council.
* Consider a process to flag which patients are at-risk of heat-related health impacts so that the above opportunistic preventative activities can occur prior to summer. Consider establishing a protocol to check on them by phone call during an extreme heat event or heatwave.

### Prepare clinical protocols

* Consider developing arrangements to appropriately identify and manage patients experiencing heat-related illness (e.g., fluids, cooling, observation, specific treatments as indicated).
* Have a low threshold for referral to General Practitioners and or emergency departments/urgent care centres for assessment if experiencing heat-related illness.
* Consider referring at-risk patients for urgent respite placement where appropriate.
* Have phone numbers of key resources within easy access – emergency departments, local Home and Community Care (HACC) services, Royal District Nursing Service (RDNS).

### Prepare the clinic’s facilities

* Ensure the practice is heat-friendly for patients and staff, with a cool waiting room, drinking water, blinds closed to block the sun, and regular staff breaks for hydration.
* Consider putting up posters and having printed information in your clinic [which are available from the department’s website](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources> (note that these are available in a range of community languages).
* Have a business continuity plan in case the power supply fails (e.g., what to do with vaccine fridges and digital health services).

### Monitor the heat health warnings

* Continue to monitor the Primary Health Network’s communications.
* Consider [subscribing to receive heat health warnings](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/subscribe-to-heat-health-alerts) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/subscribe-to-heat-health-alerts> from the Chief Health Officer.
* Consider setting up an emergency ‘watch zone’ for your clinic on the [Vic Emergency website](https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/) <https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/> to be notified of emergencies, including fires, that occur in your area. Consider advising key practice staff to download the Vic Emergency app for the latest notifications. Nominate a staff member(s) responsible to oversee all notifications and to disseminate this information to staff.
* Develop and implement a communication policy to keep staff updated if extreme heat or a heatwave is forecast.
* Have a prepared and practiced response to a heat health warning.

# Appendix 4: Guidance for community service organisations

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service providers, seek local knowledge and input from Elders to create culturally safe and accessible services to assist community members experiencing heat-related illness.

### Prepare your staff

* Remind yourself and staff of the health effects of extreme heat and who might be at higher risk of heat related harm (see Appendix 1). Consider holding a meeting prior to summer to increase staff awareness and to conduct any training related to heat and health.
* Extreme heat can affect anyone, including staff. Remind staff how to look after themselves during extreme heat and heatwaves (e.g., provide advice on staying hydrated, advice to stay cool while travelling to and from work, and encourage regular breaks).
* Plan for staff shortages during periods of extreme heat and heatwaves, and increased demand for services, including on the days that follow the heat.
* Consider key staff and management who should be involved in your organisation’s preparedness planning and response to extreme heat and heatwaves.
* Consider holding team meetings to discuss your organisation's response to heat and to develop a written policy and heat plan. Consider undertaking a practice run of your heat plan.
* Plan to hold an evaluation meeting with staff after an extreme heat event or heatwave to discuss how they dealt with it, what went well and what could be improved. [Provide any feedback and lessons learnt stories](https://vcoss.org.au/contact-us/) <https://vcoss.org.au/contact-us/>to the Victorian Council of Social Service to help build heat resilience across Victorian community social service organisations.

### Prepare at-risk clients and their carers

When seeing clients who may be at risk of heat-related illness, your organisation can take the opportunity to provide education and assess supports:

* Consider sharing information about heat health with your clients through written information, videos, social media and information sessions. Consider what languages other than English are common in the community and develop heat health resources in those languages. There are [heat health take-home resources for clients and their carers which are available from the department’s website](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources> (note that these are available in a range of community languages).
* Educate those at risk, and their carers, about how to look after themselves during hot weather. Advise them to drink fluids during hot weather, preferably water and fruit juices, and to avoid alcohol and caffeine (e.g., tea, coffee). Encourage appropriate behaviour such as reducing excessive clothing, staying out of the heat where possible, wearing a hat and sunscreen outdoors, using electric fans, applying damp towels containing ice to the skin, and taking cool showers. Advise clients that the heat may affect their medication, and to speak to their doctor for more information.
* Check they have appropriate follow-up and supports in place, including that their care plan contains heat-specific advice, contact details for their doctor and their other care workers, and there are adequate arrangements for food shopping to reduce having to go outdoors during the heat.
* [Consider the need to optimise the home environment](https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/energy-efficiency-and-reducing-emissions/save-energy-in-the-home/reduce-cooling-costs-at-home/cool-your-home-in-summer) <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/energy-efficiency-and-reducing-emissions/save-energy-in-the-home/reduce-cooling-costs-at-home/cool-your-home-in-summer> (e.g., appropriate home temperature, knowing which room is the coolest room of the house, window shading and ventilation, cooling options including support to maintain or retrofit air-conditioning and fans, adequately working fridges and freezers). If clients can’t cool their homes, advise them to spend time in an air-conditioned public space during the heat.
* Have a low threshold to refer at-risk clients to their doctor, ED and/or urgent respite placement as required.
* Reinforce to carers the importance of also caring for themselves, especially during the heat.

### Prepare for changes to service delivery

* Consider developing a list of at-risk clients and how you will ensure that this list is accessible to relevant staff. Consider calling at-risk clients daily during hot days to check on their welfare and provide tips about keeping cool. Note that there is guidance for service providers on supporting people by telephone [which is available from the department’s website](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources>.
* Considering registering appropriate clients who have consented with [Red Cross’ Telecross service <https://www.redcross.org.au/services/telecross/> to receive a daily telephone call to check on their wellbeing and with their local government’s](https://www.redcross.org.au/services/telecross/) [vulnerable persons register](https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/vulnerable-people-emergencies-policy-guideline-2-vulnerable-persons-register) <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/vulnerable-people-emergencies-policy-guideline-2-vulnerable-persons-register> to receive support during an emergency.
* Consider rescheduling appointments to earlier times of the day when it is cooler, postponing appointments to another day, or cancelling activities completely (e.g., exercise classes) to prevent clients and staff from travelling in the heat. You can also consider switching face-to-face appointments to a phone call where appropriate to limit travel for both staff and clients.
* Consider providing an extreme heat pack (e.g., water bottles, maps of local cool places, heat health information, myki or taxi vouchers to travel to and from appointments, passes to public swimming pools) to clients.
* Where possible, consider picking up medication and groceries for clients unable to travel safely in the heat.

### Prepare the facilities

* Consider the need to optimise your organisation’s facilities including, any maintenance for cooling equipment and applying for rebates for the [installation of solar panels](https://www.solar.vic.gov.au/solar-business-program) <https://www.solar.vic.gov.au/solar-business-program>.
* Ensure the organisation is heat-friendly for clients and staff, with a cool waiting room, water and ice blocks available, blinds closed to block the sun, and regular staff breaks for hydration.
* Check your local council’s heatwave plan and if public heat refuges are available. Alternatively, consider opening air-conditioned office space, or other facilities that could act as an emergency cooling station, to community members seeking refuge from the heat, if it’s safe to do so and staff members are able to provide supervision. Consider how this will be communicated to the public, including hours of operation, services available and any rules surrounding use. Consider how the community will access these, including transport to the facilities.
* Consider putting up posters and having printed information in your clinic [which are available from the department’s website](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources> (Note that these are available in a range of community languages).
* Have a plan in case of power outages (e.g., what to do with fridges, options for cooling such as wet towels, ice blocks in an esky and hand-held fans, and hard copy list of contacts for clients, staff and services).
* Have phone numbers of key resources within easy access – emergency departments, local Home and Community Care services, Nurse-On-Call, Royal District Nursing Service.

### Monitor the heat health warnings

* Consider [subscribing to receive heat health warnings](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/subscribe-to-heat-health-alerts) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/subscribe-to-heat-health-alerts> from the Chief Health Officer.
* Consider setting up an emergency ‘watch zone’ for your organisation on the [Vic Emergency website](https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/) <https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/> to be notified of emergencies, including fires, that occur in your area.
* Have a prepared and practiced response to a heat health warning for your organisation.
* Develop and implement a communication policy to keep staff and clients updated if extreme heat or a heatwave is forecasted.
* Continue to monitor the [Victorian Council of Social Service’s communications](https://vcoss.org.au/subscribe/) <https://vcoss.org.au/subscribe/>.

# Appendix 5: Guidance for mental health services

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service providers, seek local knowledge and input from Elders to create culturally safe and accessible services to assist community members experiencing heat-related illness.

### Reacquaint yourself and staff to heat health

* Remind yourself and staff about the physical health effects of extreme heat, and which clients might be at higher risk of heat related harm (see Appendix 1).
* Remind yourself and staff about the mental health effects of extreme heat, including an increased risk of suicide, mental health-related hospital admissions and mental health-related emergency department presentations.[[4]](#footnote-5)
* Consider the effect that heat may have on prescribed medications that may be taken by your clients. Some medications may have drug levels that are affected by dehydration (e.g., lithium) or may interfere with thermoregulation (e.g., selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, antipsychotics). Furthermore, some medications may also be less effective or more toxic when stored at high temperatures.
* Consider the risk of unplanned alcohol or drug withdrawal if clients are unable to cope with the heat to be able to use public transport to access alcohol or drugs, including prescribed medication and opioid maintenance therapy.
* Consider holding a meeting prior to summer to increase staff awareness and to conduct any training related to heat and health.

Prepare the workforce

* Extreme heat can affect anyone, including staff. Remind staff how to look after themselves during extreme heat and heatwaves (e.g., provide advice on staying hydrated, advice to stay cool while travelling to and from work, and encourage regular breaks).
* Plan for staff shortages during periods of extreme heat, and increased demand for services, including on the days that follow the extreme heat event or heatwave.
* Consider key staff and management who should be involved in your organisation’s preparedness planning and response to extreme heat and heatwaves.
* Consider holding team meetings to discuss your organisation's response to heat and to develop a written policy and heat plan. Consider undertaking a practice run of your heat plan.
* Plan to hold an evaluation meeting with staff after an extreme heat event or heatwave to discuss how they dealt with it, what went well, and what could be improved.

### Prepare at-risk clients

When seeing clients who may be at risk of heat-related illness, your organisation can take the opportunity to provide education and assess supports:

* Consider sharing information about heat health with your clients through written information, videos, social media and information sessions. There are [heat health take-home resources for clients and their carers which are available from the department’s website](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources> (Note that these are available in a range of community languages).
* Educate those at risk about how to look after themselves during hot weather. Advise them to drink fluids during hot weather, preferably water and fruit juices, and to avoid alcohol and caffeine (e.g., tea, coffee). Encourage appropriate behaviour such as reducing excessive clothing, staying out of the heat where possible, wearing a hat and sunscreen outdoors, using electric fans, applying damp towels containing ice to the skin, and taking cool showers.
* Advise clients that the heat may affect their medication, and to speak to their doctor for more information. Their doctor can consider reviewing their medication, and assess the risks and benefits of any changes to their medication regime.
* Check they have appropriate follow-up and supports in place, including that their care plan contains contact details for their care workers.
* [Consider the need to optimise the home environment](https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/energy-efficiency-and-reducing-emissions/save-energy-in-the-home/reduce-cooling-costs-at-home/cool-your-home-in-summer) <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/energy-efficiency-and-reducing-emissions/save-energy-in-the-home/reduce-cooling-costs-at-home/cool-your-home-in-summer> (e.g., appropriate home temperature, knowing which room is the coolest room of the house, window shading and ventilation, cooling options, adequately working fridges and freezers). If clients can’t cool their homes, advise them to spend time in an air-conditioned public space during the heat, including any public heat refuges provided by your local council.
* Have a low threshold to refer at-risk clients to their doctor, ED and/or urgent respite placement as required.
* Remind any carers of the importance of also caring for themselves, especially during the heat.

### Prepare for changes to service delivery

* Consider developing a list of at-risk clients and how you will ensure that this list is accessible to relevant staff. Consider calling at-risk clients daily during hot days to check on their welfare and provide tips about keeping cool. Note that there is guidance for service providers on supporting people by telephone [which is available from the department’s website](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources>.
* Considering registering appropriate clients who have consented with [Red Cross’ Telecross service](https://www.redcross.org.au/services/telecross/) <https://www.redcross.org.au/services/telecross/> to receive a daily telephone call to check on their wellbeing and with their local government’s [vulnerable persons register](https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/vulnerable-people-emergencies-policy-guideline-2-vulnerable-persons-register) <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/vulnerable-people-emergencies-policy-guideline-2-vulnerable-persons-register> to receive support during an emergency.
* Consider rescheduling appointments to earlier times of the day when it is cooler, postponing appointments to another day, or cancelling activities completely (e.g., outdoor group Occupational Therapy classes) to prevent clients and staff from travelling in the heat. You can also consider switching face-to-face appointments to a phone call where appropriate to limit travel for both staff and clients.
* Consider providing an extreme heat pack (e.g., water bottles, maps of local cool places, heat health information, myki or taxi vouchers to travel to and from appointments, passes to public swimming pools) to clients.
* Where possible, consider picking up medication and groceries for clients unable to travel safely in the heat.

### Prepare the facilities

* Consider the need to optimise your organisation’s facilities including, any maintenance for cooling equipment and applying for rebates for the [installation of solar panels](https://www.solar.vic.gov.au/solar-business-program) <https://www.solar.vic.gov.au/solar-business-program>.
* Ensure the organisation is heat-friendly for clients and staff, with a cool waiting room, water and ice blocks available, blinds closed to block the sun, and regular staff breaks for hydration.
* Consider putting up posters and having printed information in your clinic [which are available from the department’s website](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/extreme-heat-community-resources> (Note that these are available in a range of community languages).
* Have a plan in case of power outages (e.g., what to do with fridges, options for cooling such as wet towels, ice blocks in an esky and hand-held fans, and hard copy list of contacts for clients, staff and services).
* Have phone numbers of key resources within easy access – emergency departments, local Home and Community Care services, Nurse-On-Call, Royal District Nursing Service.

### Monitor the heat health warnings

* Consider [subscribing to receive heat health warnings](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/subscribe-to-heat-health-alerts) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/subscribe-to-heat-health-alerts> from the Chief Health Officer.
* Consider setting up an emergency ‘watch zone’ for your organisation on the [Vic Emergency website](https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/) <https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/> to be notified of emergencies, including fires, that occur in your area.
* Have a prepared and practiced response to a heat health warning for your organisation.
* Develop and implement a communication policy to keep staff and clients updated if extreme heat or a heatwave is forecasted.

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1. Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Victoria’s Climate Science Report 2019. [Internet] Melbourne: Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning; 2019. Available from https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/\_\_data/assets/pdf\_file/0029/442964/Victorias-Climate-Science-Report-2019.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Extreme heat refers to one or two days of unusually high maximum and minimum temperatures that could negatively affect human health. Prolonged periods of extreme heat, lasting three or more consecutive days, is referred to as a heatwave. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Coates L, Haynes K, O’Brien J, McAneney J, De Oliveira FD. Exploring 167 years of vulnerability: An examination of extreme heat events in Australia 1844–2010. Environmental Science & Policy. 2014 Oct 1;42:33-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Liu J, Varghese BM, Hansen A, Xiang J, Zhang Y, Dear K, Gourley M, Driscoll T, Morgan G, Capon A, Bi P. Is there an association between hot weather and poor mental health outcomes? A systematic review and meta-analysis. Environment international. 2021 Aug 1;153:106533. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)