



2021 Health Advisory #9

Help Prevent Heat-Related Illness and Death Among People Most At Risk of Heat-Health Impacts During the COVID-19 Pandemic

May 17, 2021

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.
- Encourage people 12 and older to get vaccinated against COVID-19.
- Be aware that even as the City phases into recovery, continued COVID-19 transmission, risk mitigation measures, and lasting economic impacts may put people at risk for indoor heat exposure because they are limiting either contact with others or use of air conditioning due to cost concerns.
- Remind patients that all hot weather, particularly heat waves, can be dangerous and instruct them to use air conditioning.
- Refer patients without air conditioning to the HEAP air conditioner assistance program, which is now also available to people living in public housing or receiving Section 8 housing benefits. If available, assign a staff person to support patients with HEAP applications.
- Encourage people to pay attention to official announcements about places where they can go to get relief from the heat.
- Instruct people and their caregivers to stay cool and well-hydrated.

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 these 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
 - Antipsychotics
- Substance use disorder or excessive alcohol consumption
- 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 contribute to poorer health.

Air Conditioning 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.



NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE
Dave A. Chokshi, MD, MSc
Commissioner

Dear Colleagues,

As hot weather arrives, we are asking for your help in preventing heat-related illness and death by providing guidance to patients who are at increased risk and their caregivers. This summer, the risk of COVID-19 transmission must continue to be balanced against the risk of heat-related illness. Despite increasing COVID-19 vaccination, ongoing community transmission and devastating economic impacts have left an ever-growing number of New Yorkers at high risk of heat-related illness or death due to challenges in staying home safely during the summer months. During hot weather, staying in un-air conditioned homes can increase risk for heat-related death or illness. You can help by identifying patients who are at-risk of heat-related illness, reminding them of the health risks of extreme heat (heatwaves), sharing information on how they can access cooling and utility assistance when needed, and encouraging them to plan how to find relief from the heat.

Extreme heat events kill more New Yorkers, on average, than any other extreme weather. Hot weather both predisposes people to hyperthermia and exacerbates chronic medical conditions. Heat-related illness and COVID-19 inequitably impact communities of color and people living in poverty.

Most heat-related victims do not have or use air conditioners and are overcome by heat in their homes. 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 public health emergency, 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 due to the ongoing economic impact of COVID-19. Use the checklist on page 1 to identify people most at risk of heat-related illness and provide the following guidance.

Guidance for people at greatest risk to heat-related illness or death

- Remind people that heat events (heatwaves) 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.
- Encourage people to use their air conditioners. Suggest setting air

Cooling Assistance Program

From May 3 to August 31, 2021, 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. All HRA offices are closed, so completed applications must be mailed (no drop-off) to NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA). At this time, HEAP funds cannot be used to pay electric utility costs. **Since last year, people living in public housing or receiving housing subsidies are eligible to apply.**

We urge you to:

- ✓ Encourage people at increased risk of heat-related illness 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.

conditioners to 78 degrees or “low” cool to provide comfort, save on electricity costs, and conserve energy.

- Encourage patients 12 and older to get vaccinated against COVID-19. For tools to assist in having these discussions with patients, such as [Addressing Patients’ COVID-19 Vaccine Questions: A Guide for Health Care Providers](#), visit nyc.gov/VaccineTalks.
- If people do not have air conditioning, encourage people to apply for a free air conditioner through the Home Energy Assistance Program (see “Cooling Assistance Program” box on page 2).
- Guide people without air conditioning or with financial concerns about using home air conditioning to consider family, friends or neighbors they can visit even for a couple of hours to stay cool during a heatwave.
 - People who are fully vaccinated can visit fully vaccinated family, friends and neighbors without physical distancing and face coverings. Those who are not fully vaccinated should continue to practice physical distancing and wear face coverings when gathering with others, especially if they are at increased risk of severe COVID-19 or gathering with other unvaccinated individuals.
 - Regardless of vaccination status, encourage patients to wear a face covering and practice physical distancing when in public, particularly when indoors or in crowded spaces. People who are vaccinated do not need to use a face covering when outdoors, unless in a crowded space where physical distancing is not possible.
- Let people know that the City will share a list of alternative cooling spaces prior to and during a heatwave. Also, people can also call 311 or go to maps.nyc.gov/oem/cc to find a cooling center in New York 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. Remind them that all hot weather – including but not limited to heatwaves – can be dangerous and help them develop a plan to stay cool.
- Discuss with people and their caregivers about the signs and symptoms of heat-related illness or risk of exacerbating chronic medical conditions associated with excessive heat and provide guidance about when to call 911 or go to the emergency department. 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,

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