

Avoid heat stress during a water shortage or drought



There are various causes of heat stress, one of which is dehydration due to not drinking enough water, especially when outside temperatures are very high. During a water shortage or drought, it's especially important to make sure you're drinking enough water in order to avoid suffering from heat stress.

It's important to be aware of the symptoms of the different kinds of heat stress so that you know how to treat those symptoms, and recognise when to seek medical advice. The four main types of heat stress we'll be looking at are heat cramps, heat exhaustion, heat stroke, and heat syncope (fainting).

Heat cramps

Heat cramps are the mildest form of heat stress and they occur when the body is unable to cool itself down via sweating. The signs and symptoms of heat cramps include sweating, fatigue, thirst, and muscle cramps. If you think you might be suffering from heat cramps, get to a cool area, hydrate yourself with cold water or a sports drink containing electrolytes, and rest.

Heat exhaustion

Heat exhaustion also occurs when your body overheats but it can be a bit more serious than heat cramps. Possible causes include spending prolonged time in hot temperatures (especially

when humidity levels are high) and physical exertion.

The Mayo Clinic lists the following signs and symptoms of heat exhaustion, which may occur suddenly or over a period of time:

- Cool, moist skin with goosebumps when in the heat.
- Heavy sweating.
- Faintness.
- Dizziness.
- Fatigue.
- Weak, rapid pulse.
- Low blood pressure upon standing.
- Muscle cramps.
- Nausea.
- Headache.

If you think you're experiencing heat exhaustion, stop all physical activity, move to a cooler place or leave the hot working environment you're in, lie down and elevate your legs slightly, and ensure you're well hydrated by drinking water (cold water if possible).



It's advisable to seek medical attention if any person suspected of suffering from heat exhaustion faints, seems confused, experiences a seizure or has a fever of over 40 degrees.

Heat stroke

Heat stroke is one of the most serious forms of heat stress and usually occurs when a person experiences a fever of 40 degrees or higher. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the signs and symptoms to look out for include:

- Hot, dry skin or profuse sweating.
- Confusion and dizziness.
- Hallucinations.
- A throbbing headache.
- A fever of 40 degrees or more.
- Slurred speech.

The possible causes of heat stroke are the same as for heat exhaustion above, but seeking emergency medical treatment is crucial if heat stroke is suspected because, if untreated, it can cause damage to the brain, heart, kidneys, and muscles.

While waiting for medical attention to arrive, get the person suffering from heat stroke to a cool

area, let them lie down, make sure that they are well hydrated, and sponge them down with cold water (or try get them to a cold bath or shower).

Heat syncope

Heat syncope (fainting) occurs when dizziness and light-headedness is experienced after prolonged standing or suddenly getting up from a sedentary position. Dehydration and lack of acclimatisation are known causes of heat syncope. Treatment includes getting the person to a cool area and ensuring that they are rested and hydrated.

If you need to be physically active at work or during an outdoor event, for example, ensure that you follow these steps to avoid heat stress and help your body to keep your temperature regular:

- Wear light, loose fitting clothing in a material (such as cotton) that breathes.
- Take regular breaks from bouts of physical exertion and try minimise your exposure to direct heat and sun when you do so.
- Stay well hydrated. The CDC advises drinking 1 cup (250ml) of water every 15-20 minutes if you're working or exercising in extremely hot conditions.
- Avoid consuming alcohol or drinks high in sugar or caffeine.