- Heat

How to beat the heatwave

With the Met Office issuing a rare red alert for extreme heat, Jack Rear examines how to protect yourself

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Britain is sweltering and it's only going to get hotter, with temperatures forecast to hit 39C in parts of England and Wales this week. But while warm weather brings all sorts of health benefits, it also poses a number of risks.



Prof Mark Whiteley, a consultant venous surgeon and founder of The Whiteley Clinic, explains: "We have to keep a consistent internal body temperature of 37C, otherwise the enzymes in our cells and cell walls start changing shape and that can cause irreversible damage.
"Think of an egg white – once you cook it, you see that protein turn white, and it won't go clear again even if it cools down."

He adds: “If you get too hot, the processes in your cells don’t work. That’s what kills you. Everything else, from dehydration to vein dilation, are secondary issues with their own side effects.

“Once you get over about 42C internally, you get heatstroke... Everything else you might notice about getting unwell in the heat is just the systems that are trying to keep you cool, failing one by one.”

Symptoms of heatstroke include a high body temperature (above 40C), an altered mental state, confusion, dizziness, hot and dry skin, a rapid heartbeat, a loss of consciousness and, eventually, death.

While there is always some variance between individuals, the elderly, young children and some individuals with medical conditions can be far more susceptible to heatstroke.

“Infants and older individuals have a less efficient thermoregulatory system,” says Dr Chun Tang, a medical director and GP at Pall Mall Medical.

“Babies and older people may be more prone to dehydration due to reduced fluid intake, or an inability to communicate thirst. Babies have undeveloped sweat glands, while they sometimes stop working as well in older people.”

But even healthy adults in the prime of their lives can have fatal reactions to becoming too hot. The most obvious cause of death in the heat is dehydration as the body loses water through sweat, but its impact can be felt very differently across the body. Here are six things to do in this hot spell:

“High temperatures can place extra stress on the cardiovascular system, as the body works harder to cool itself down, and moves more blood to the functions that do that,” says Dr Tang. “This can lead to an increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, and potentially exacerbate underlying heart conditions.”

In short, this means you’re much more likely to have a heart attack when you’re hot.

Prof Whiteley says: “When you get hot, your veins get very dilated, especially on your head and scalp, which is where you lose a lot of heat.”

This can cause veins to look bigger and the skin to look redder as the blood is diverted close to the surface to cool down. You will see this more in your face as the body loses most heat from the head.

More worrisome is the increased risk of blood clots.

“When you’re dehydrated, water leaves the blood to be sweated out, so you get more cells in the blood, making it thicker and stickier, increasing the chance of a clot,” says Prof Whiteley.

“It can also damage the lining of the blood vessels which can lead to varicose veins. If you’re trying not to move to keep cooler, that means the blood isn’t flowing as quickly. That increases the chance of a clot. If you’re very dehydrated, maybe drinking alcohol – which dehydrates you even more – and then on top of that you have varicose veins, your risk of getting a clot in the veins of your legs is reasonably high.

“If that clot gets to your lungs, then it can cause a pulmonary embolism, preventing blood from getting oxygen which can cause a heart attack.”

For this reason, Prof Whiteley advises that it is important to keep moving, even slightly, on top of drinking plenty of fluids.

“In extreme heat, the air can become dry, hot, and polluted” says Dr Tang. “This can irritate the upper respiratory system and exacerbate existing respiratory conditions such as asthma.”
In extreme cases, this “bronchoconstriction” can cause people to experience a shortness of breath because the irritation of the upper respiratory system is stopping the body from being able to transport as much oxygen to the lungs.
In hot weather especially, the body trying to maintain a normal temperature requires extra oxygen, which can be dangerous, especially in people with asthma.
‘If you get too hot, the processes in your cells don’t work. That’s what kills you’
“In hot weather, the body may retain more fluid as a response to heat and dehydration,” explains Dr Tang. “This can lead to swelling in the feet and ankles called oedema. It can also be caused if you aren’t moving as much.”
While the condition is more unsightly than dangerous, it can be uncomfortable. The swelling should go down by itself, but it can help to raise the feet and ankles above the legs. Keeping well hydrated prevents the body from holding onto fluids.
Dehydration causes headaches because when your brain loses water, it shrinks. What you’re feeling is brain tissue pulling away from your skull, putting pressure on nerves. But it gets worse.
“High temperatures can impair cognitive function, affecting attention, memory, decisionmaking and concentration,” says Dr Tang. “Heat-related cognitive impairment can lead to decreased productivity, impaired judgement and increased risk of accidents.”
As the body diverts blood to the skin to cool down, the brain is getting less than it needs. And the body loses minerals such as salt and electrolytes through sweating.
Dr Tang explains: “These are required for sending signals to the rest of the body. If these nerves are less able to function, it can result in fatigue and lethargy.”
Drinking water is key, but it is worth considering other ways to replenish your electrolytes.
“Focus on consuming foods naturally rich in potassium, magnesium and sodium,” advises Claudia le Feuvre, a nutritional therapist at Goldster, a health app. “Bananas, avocados, coconut water, leafy greens and natural sea salt are all excellent sources.”
Minerals in the blood such as potassium – important in muscle function – can be lost via sweat, causing painful heat cramps.
“Heat cramps are painful muscle contractions or spasms that occur during or after intense physical activity in high temperatures,” notes Dr Tang. “They particularly affect the calves, arms, abdominal wall and back, though they can affect any muscle which you’re using.”
Unlike regular muscle spasms which you might get after exercise, heat cramps are significantly more intense.
While you might be more worried about the UV rays in sunlight causing a sunburn, or even skin cancer, when you go on holiday, intense heat at any time of year brings its own problems.
Dr Tang says: “Heat rash, also known as prickly heat, can occur in hot and humid conditions when sweat ducts become clogged.” Appearing much like sunburn, the rash can become painful and is often itchy. Taking cool baths or showers can help clean out the pores, preventing the rash in the first place. You should also try to avoid anything which might block pores, including sun cream and deodorant. Wearing loose clothing and staying hydrated also helps.