

NEWS BRIEF

Preparing for the Next West Coast Heat Wave

The West Coast continues to experience devastating, record-setting temperatures. A late-June heat wave brought extreme temperatures to the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia, leaving hundreds of people dead and hospitalizing others for heat-related illness, as well as sparking numerous wildfires. Weather experts predict another imminent heat wave with excessive heat across the Northwest.

What Is a Heat Wave?

A heat wave is defined as an extended period of extreme heat, often accompanied by high humidity. These conditions can be dangerous—even life-threatening—for people who don't take proper precautions.

Heat kills by pushing the human body beyond its limits. In a heat wave, evaporation slows and the body must work even harder to maintain a normal temperature.

Types of Heat-related Emergencies

Heat and humidity can cause several heat-related illnesses, including heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Normally, the body has ways to keep itself cool by allowing heat to escape through the skin and evaporating sweat (perspiration).

However, if the body can't cool down properly or does not cool down enough, a person may suffer a heat-related illness. Anyone is susceptible to a heat-related illness, but the very young and elderly are at the greatest risk. Heat-related illnesses can become serious or even deadly if unattended.

These are three types of heat-related emergencies to be mindful of:

- **Heat cramps** are muscular pains and spasms caused by heavy exertion. They are generally the result of a loss of water and salt through sweating.
- **Heat exhaustion** is caused by fluid loss and decreased blood flow to the vital organs. It can produce flu-like symptoms.
- **Heat stroke** is the most severe heat-related emergency and occurs when the body's internal cooling system fails. It is life-threatening and requires immediate and aggressive action—call 911.

Stay Safe in the Heat

When the weather is extremely hot, it is critical to take necessary precautions in order to remain safe. Consider these tips:

- Listen to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Weather Radio for critical updates from the National Weather Service.
- Use box fans and ceiling fans to promote air circulation throughout your home if your home doesn't have air conditioning,
- Seek comfort in public buildings, such as libraries, schools, movie theaters, shopping malls and other air-conditioned community facilities.



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- Do errands and outside chores early or late in the day.
- Replace heavy or hot meals with lighter, refreshing foods. Avoid using salt tablets unless directed to do so by a doctor.
- Drink plenty of water, even if you do not feel thirsty, and avoid drinks with caffeine. People with epilepsy; heart, kidney or liver disease; or who are on fluid-restricted diets or have problems with fluid retention should consult a doctor before increasing their fluid intake.
- Limit alcoholic beverages since these are diuretics and can cause dehydration.
- Dress in loose-fitting, lightweight and brightly-colored clothes that cover as much skin as possible. Avoid dark colors because they absorb the sun's rays.
- Protect your face and head from sun exposure by wearing a wide-brimmed hat.
- When working in extreme heat, use the buddy system, take frequent breaks and rehydrate. If possible, try to avoid strenuous work during the warmest part of the day.
- Take a cool shower or apply a cold compress to your pulse points.
- Check on your animals frequently to ensure they are not suffering from the heat.
- If your home loses power as the heat wave continues, go to a designated public shelter.

What's Next?

Remain watchful, check on loved ones and neighbors, and use the safety tips to stay safe during a heat wave. Knowing what to do in extreme heat can be a true lifesaver.