

Older and Wiser: Here are some steps seniors can take to beat the heat

As summer arrives, there are many things seniors can do to prepare for heat events

Margaret Coates July 6, 2022



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The long-awaited summer has arrived on the North Shore.

It is a time to shake off the inactivity of the winter and rainy spring months. Warm days and nights provide a wonderful incentive to get out and enjoy walking, hiking, gardening, or doing an outdoor activity like going to the park for a picnic or playing pickleball.

Last year, as we know, was complicated by a heat dome which posed serious health and safety issues for seniors, and in fact caused heat-related deaths. While we might not have a serious or life-threatening heat wave this year, it does pay to be smart about the heat.

If the weather is sunny and warm, but not unbearable, we still need to be aware of how warmer temperatures can affect us. This is the time of the year when risks of becoming dehydrated and sick from the heat are the greatest for older people. Dehydration occurs when you use or lose more fluid than you take in, and your body doesn't have enough water and other fluids to carry out its normal functions. If you don't replace lost fluids, you will get dehydrated.

Older people are at higher risk of dehydration because as we grow older our bodies have less ability to hold on to water and to feel thirsty. So, it is advisable to drink water (best form of liquid) throughout the day. It has been suggested that for a 150-pound person, about eight glasses of water should be consumed per day. We should also avoid sugary drinks and alcohol.

HealthLink BC says that “too much heat can be harmful to your health. Heat-related illness is the result of your body gaining heat faster than it can cool itself down. Heat-related illness can lead to weakness, disorientation, and exhaustion. In severe cases, it can lead to heat stroke, also known as sunstroke. Heat stroke is a life-threatening medical emergency.” HealthLink BC suggests calling 811 (available 24/7) for health advice.

Isolated seniors or people who live alone in poorly ventilated environments or without air conditioning are very susceptible. According to Health Canada, symptoms of heat illness can include dizziness or fainting, nausea or vomiting, headache, rapid breathing and heartbeat, extreme thirst, and decreased urination with unusually dark yellow urine. Health Canada suggests, “If you have any of these symptoms during extreme heat, move to a cool place and drink liquids right away.”

If we have a heat dome event such as the one we experienced last year, we’ll need to rely on more ways to avoid heat-related illness in the hot weather. You might need to find air-conditioned spaces like libraries, community centres and recreation centres to hang out in for parts of the day. Or you could go to cooling centres which will be stationed across the North Shore. North Shore Emergency Management will have a list when the weather is hot enough to open them. Either call them at 778-338-6300 or [check out their website at nsem.ca](http://nsem.ca). The website also has important information about emergency preparedness.

Be aware of other simple strategies to beat the heat. These include dressing for the weather (wear protective, breathable, and light fabric), avoiding the direct sun, wearing sunscreen and a hat. If you have an outdoor area, fill up a kiddie pool and plunge your feet in, or indoors you could fill a large container with water and stick your feet in. Take a cooling shower when you feel overheated.

Exercise wisely, without getting overheated. Staying cool and trying to stay active might involve combining activities like walking along the sea wall where it is generally cooler. Or you could go on a forest walk under a canopy of trees. As we know, the North Shore has many fantastic walks by the ocean and in the forest. Mosquito Creek combines a tree canopy and water. If you can get to the Shipyards at the bottom of Lonsdale, join the kids at the water park – there’s no reason you can’t dip your toes in.

Enjoy the summer, but be heat smart.

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