BEAT THE HEAT

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is most at risk during a heatwave?

Vulnerable groups of people include:

- **Those living in poor housing and with low income.**
- **Pregnant persons**

  Pregnant persons are more susceptible to the effects of heat due to physiological changes during pregnancy that can impact their ability to regulate body temperature effectively. When exposed to extreme heat, pregnant persons may experience challenges in dissipating internal heat, leading to an increase in core body temperature. This temperature rise can potentially result in adverse outcomes for both the mother and the foetus, including dehydration, which impairs the body's cooling mechanisms like sweating.
- **Infants and children up to four years of age**

  Infants and young children have a higher metabolism and kidneys that are not fully mature, which can lead to dehydration more quickly, increasing their risk of heat-related illnesses when exposed to extreme heat. Additionally, infants have more sensitive skin, making them prone to sunburns, which can exacerbate heat-related issues. Unlike adults, infants cannot sweat effectively, and this impairs their ability to regulate body temperature, making them more susceptible to heat-related illnesses such as heat stroke.
- **Older adults (over 65 years old)**

  Older adults aged 65 and above are more exposed to heat effects due to physiological changes that reduce their ability to regulate body temperature, pre-existing chronic health conditions that can be exacerbated by heat stress, medications that affect temperature regulation, cognitive decline impacting awareness of heat-related risks, and socioeconomic factors like limited access to cooling facilities.
- **Overweight people**
- **People with chronic diseases** such as heart failure, renal failure, diabetes, and mental health disorders.
- **People living in heavily built environments.** The urban environment in Malta, especially in the presence of concrete and the lack of mature trees, means that the temperature is often higher than in small villages.
- **Outdoor workers.** Due to constant exposure to heat.
- **People who take certain medications** such as certain types of antipsychotics and antihypertensives (N.B. never stop or change medications without consulting your doctor).
  - **Antipsychotics** can change your regulation of heat, your ability to sense that you're too hot and your ability to sweat.
  - **Antihypertensives** like diuretics cause more water to be lost, which increases a person's susceptibility to the effects of heat.

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How can we protect vulnerable relatives, neighbours, and friends like the elderly during a heatwave?

- **Ensure Proper Hydration:**
  Encourage elderly relatives to drink plenty of water and keep it easily accessible. The thirst mechanism may not work as effectively in older individuals, so they may need reminders to stay hydrated.

- **Maintain Cool Environments:**
  Ensure that air conditioning and fans are used during hot months to help older adults stay cool. If they are unable to leave their homes to cool down, make sure they have access to cooling, methods within their living spaces. Fans do not help in cooling above a temperature of 35˚C Ensure adequate maintenance and upkeep of air conditioning units before summer sets in. Ensure that these individuals remain in the coolest part of the house during the day and that they ventilate their house at night.

- **Regular Communication:**
  Stay in regular contact with elderly and vulnerable people, especially if you do not live in the same area. Monitor their well-being by checking on them daily and ensuring they are coping well with the heat.

- **Medication Considerations:**
  Be aware that certain medications can increase sensitivity to the heat, making older adults more prone to heat-related issues. Consult with healthcare providers about any necessary precautions for medication-related risks.