

*SUPPORTING PEOPLE WHO
USE SUBSTANCES
DURING EXTREME HEAT EVENTS*



The Ontario Harm Reduction Distribution Program

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What is an Extreme Heat Event?

An '**extreme heat event**' refers to a long period of excessively high temperatures that pose health risks to the population. What will trigger a heat warning alert varies between Ontario regions. Extreme heat events can lead to heat-related illnesses such as heat exhaustion and heat stroke, especially among vulnerable populations like individuals who use substances.

According to the Ontario government's [A Harmonized Heat Warning and Information System, 2023](#) the following table shows the heat warning regions and associated triggers (region, intensity, and duration).

Heat Warning Region	Condition	Duration
Extreme Southwestern Ontario	*Tmax ≥ 31C and Tmin ≥ 21C Or Humidex ≥ 42	2+ days
Southern Ontario	Tmax ≥ 31C and Tmin ≥ 20C Or Humidex ≥ 40	2+ days
Northern Ontario	Tmax ≥ 29C and Tmin ≥ 18C Or Humidex ≥ 36	2+ days

***Tmax** represents maximum daily temperature. **Tmin** represents minimum nighttime temperature

A heat warning is for a 2-day event and an **extended heat warning** is for a 3+ event.

Extreme heat occurs when the body cannot cool itself efficiently, leading to heat-related illnesses such as heat exhaustion and heat stroke. This situation often arises when high temperatures are accompanied by high humidity, which hampers the body's ability to sweat and cool down.

Extreme Heat Events and People Who Use Substances

Why are people who use substances at greater risk?

Opioid and stimulant use increase the risk for heat related illness. There is an association between heat events and an increase in overdoses.

Stimulants (cocaine, crystal meth, crack, etc.)	Stimulants cause blood vessels to narrow (vasoconstriction), which reduces blood flow to the skin. This reduces the body's ability to sweat (release heat). Stimulants can increase body movement which can increase body temperature. Together, this can lead to overheating and dehydration.
Opioids (fentanyl, fentanyl analogues, heroin, etc.)	Opioids can make it harder to feel the effects of heat and take protective measures. They can also widen blood vessels at the skin level (vasodilation), causing excessive sweating that can lead to dehydration.
Opioid Agonist Therapy (OAT) (methadone, suboxone, sublocade, Kadian, etc.)	Like illicit opioids, OAT can cause excessive sweating which can result in dehydration.
Withdrawal	In extreme heat events people may not be able to physically tolerate the temperature to access supplies, prescriptions, or substances/drugs. This increases risk of withdrawal. Withdrawal symptoms like vomiting and diarrhea increase chance of dehydration and worsening health outcomes.

Other barriers for people who use substances

Cognitive impairment and reduced mobility can impact ability to understand or respond to extreme heat. These can affect the ability to recognize overheating and take action to rehydrate, go to a cooling centre, or find other relief.

Experiencing poor quality housing, homelessness, and lack of necessities are risk factors for increased death during extreme heat events. (Korvats and Hajat, 2008)

During extreme heat events and heat waves, indoor temperatures continue to build over days and temperatures may not drop indoors like they do outside in the evening. In 2021 during a BC heat event 98% of deaths occurred indoors.

Signs and Symptoms of Heat Related Illness and What To Do

<p>Mild</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling unwell • Dizzy • Headache, irritable • Fatigue • Thirsty • Very warm skin and sweaty • Reduced urine output 	<p>Immediate Cooling to Prevent Progression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relocate to a cooler space • Remove excess clothing • Encourage fluid intake • Apply cool water, wet towels, or ice packs to the body • Use a spray bottle for misting water
<p>Moderate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nausea • Light-headed • Weakness • Extreme fatigue, malaise • Very thirsty or dry mouth • Difficulty swallowing • Heat rash, unusual swelling or cramps • Rapid heart rate • Body temperature over 38 C • Reduced urine output (dark urine) 	<p>Immediate Cooling to Prevent Progression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relocate to a cooler space • Remove excess clothing • Lie individual on back or semi upright position • Encourage fluid intake • Apply cool water, wet towels, or ice packs to the body • Use a spray bottle for misting water • Call 911 if there is no improvement
<p>Severe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faint or loss of consciousness • Unusual confusion • Severe nausea and vomiting • Difficulty speaking • Unusual coordination problems • Hot flushed or very pale skin • Not sweating • Rapid breathing • Faint rapid heart rate • Body temp over 39C • Very low dark urine output 	<p>Life Threatening Emergency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call 911 • Reduce core body temp • Remove excess clothing • Lie individual on back or small upright position • Apply cool water, wet towel or ice packs to the body (armpits, neck, groin)

Important: Individuals may experience symptoms during an extreme heat event. Some will have symptoms that last for weeks after. Check-ins are important during the heat event, and after it. Extreme heat for several days can impact mental health.

Encourage service users to seek medical care if they experience: more irritability than normal, psychological distress, aggression/violence, or suicidal thoughts.

Consider Messaging During Extreme Heat Events

Some traditional messages can have barriers



Make sure to hydrate

This could be difficult because:

- Decreased thirst perception when under the influence of substances or experiencing challenges with mental health
- Swallowing difficulties if the person is sedated
- Water accessibility issues or inadequate access to potable water



If you don't have access to air conditioning, use a cooling centre

This can be difficult because:

- Mobility, transportation and accessibility challenges
- Cooling center hours (usually only daytime hours)
- Distrust of services or service providers
- Stigma (feeling unwelcomed or unsafe)
- Having pets that may not be allowed inside these facilities
- Leaving personal belongings unattended

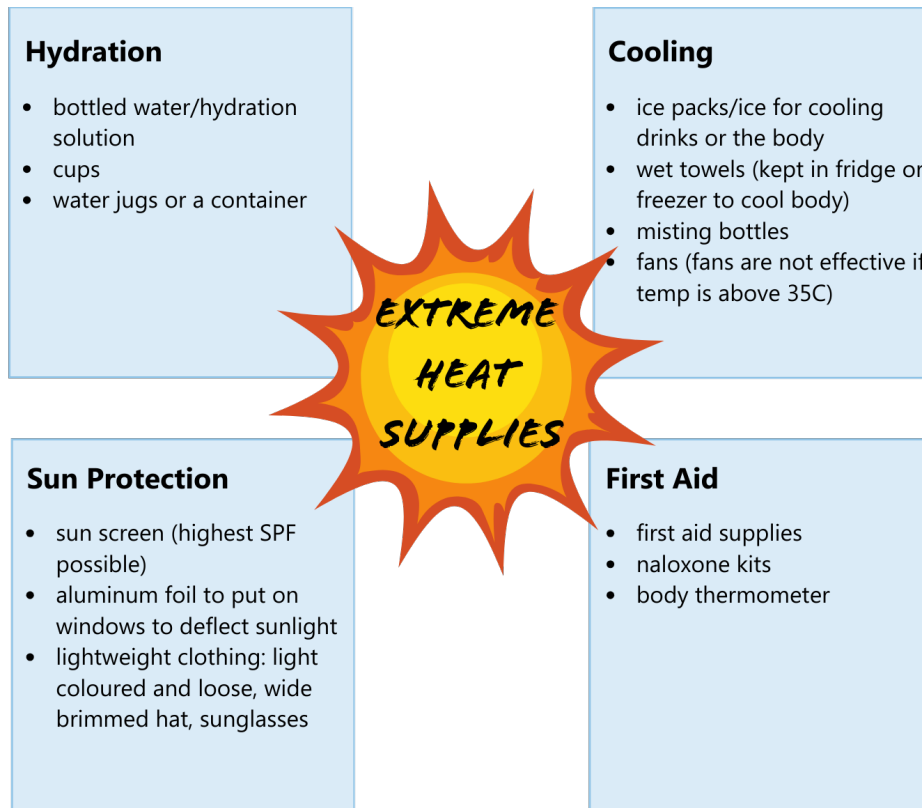
Consider asking these questions:



1. Do you have access to drinking water?
2. Do you have someone who can remind you to hydrate?
3. Are there any reasons why you wouldn't be able to go to a cooling centre?
4. Do you know where the cooling centres are?

How Harm Reduction Programs Can Support Service Users During Extreme Heat Events

1 Supplies that can help in an extreme heat event



2 Encourage planning before the heat event

3 Prepare for higher client demands (e.g. more staff during heat events)

4 Increase outreach and service user check-ins (in-person visits are best)

5 Increase program service hours

6 Provide access to taxi or transportation vouchers/tickets

7 Provide training for staff and service users about:

- Risks associated with using substances in extreme heat & how to stay cool
- Signs and symptoms of heat related illness and how to manage heat related illness

Key Messages to Share With Service Users

EAT & DRINK

Drink plenty of water during & after the heat event – EVEN when not thirsty.

BE AWARE

Substances can affect your body differently during extreme heat.

Stimulants can increase body temperature making it hard to cool down.

Opioids can cause excessive sweating leading to dehydration.

MOVE TO Cooler Spaces

Move to indoor spaces with air conditioning like a cooling centre, library, mall, or community centre.

STAGGER USE

Space out doses. Go low and go slow.

Keep Your SPACE COOL

Indoors

Open windows at night, close windows early morning, cover windows with foil, white blinds, or curtains.

In a Tent

Move your tent into the shade, take off the rain fly and leave windows open.

PROTECT & COOL Your Body

- Use the highest sunscreen possible. Wear light-coloured, loose-fitting clothing if possible. Wear a wide brimmed hat if possible. Take many rest breaks. Move to cooler, shaded areas
- Use fans & water to cool your body
- Put cool water on your body: mist, wet towels, or take a shower if possible

Carry NALOXONE

Overdoses may happen more easily in extreme heat.

PLAN AHEAD

- Have enough harm reduction supplies on hand
- Check in on neighbours and friends
- Plan activities for the morning or evening when it's cooler

Ask a pharmacist:

- If any of your medicine will affect how your body handles extreme heat
- if you can get extended carries to last through the heat and a few days after

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