

EXTREME HEAT

community care facilities



Extreme heat and heat waves both mean the same thing: hotter than normal weather. Extreme heat can lead to heat illnesses including dehydration, heat exhaustion and **heat stroke**, a medical emergency that can lead to permanent disability or death. Extreme heat can also worsen pre-existing health conditions.

Licensed community care facilities serve many of the populations most at risk for heat-related illness, such as:

- Older adults, aged 60 years or older
- People with pre-existing health conditions, such as diabetes, heart or respiratory disease
- People with mental illness, such as schizophrenia, depression and anxiety
- People with substance use disorders, including alcohol
- People with limited mobility

Making sure that all people can keep cool and drink plenty of water is the best way to prevent heat-related illnesses.



Extreme Heat Alerts:

In British Columbia, there are two alert levels for extreme heat: **Heat Warning** (Level 1) and **Extreme Heat Emergency** (Level 2). These alerts mean that health risks are increased due to high heat.

It is important to sign up for official weather alerts from Environment and Climate Change Canada, to know when an alert is declared and when to take additional actions to keep children cool. See the weather links in the *resources* section on page 6 for more information.

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Early signs of heat illness (*heat exhaustion*):

Heat illness can quickly become an emergency. Watch residents closely during hot weather and act promptly to cool them down if they show any of these signs:

- New skin rash
- Heavy sweating
- Dizziness
- Nausea or vomiting
- Rapid breathing and heartbeat
- Headache
- Difficulty concentrating
- Muscle cramps
- Extreme thirst
- Dark urine and decreased urination

If possible, move people with symptoms to a cool space. Give them water to drink. Loosen or remove clothing. Cool their body with water, e.g. dampen their clothes, apply wet towels, put ice packs against their body. Continue cooling and giving them water until they feel better. If they do not start feeling better or if symptoms increase, call 9-1-1.



Emergency signs of heat illness (*heat stroke*):

- High body temperature (39°C / 102°F or higher)
- Fainting or decreased consciousness
- Confusion
- Lack of coordination
- Very hot and red skin

CALL 9-1-1 OR SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION

If possible, move them to a cool space. Loosen or remove clothing. Quickly begin cooling their body with cool water, e.g. dampen their clothes, apply wet towels, put ice packs against their body, provide a cool sponge bath or shower. Continue applying cool water and watch them until 9-1-1 or medical personnel arrive.



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Heat events and wildfire smoke:

Wildfire smoke and heat events can occur at the same time. Ensure that there are measures in place to provide clean indoor air. Make sure that indoor temperatures are measured and indoor spaces do not get too hot, especially when windows and doors need to be kept closed during wildfire smoke events. **Cooler and cleaner indoor air** is the best way to protect from negative health impacts.



Use of fans:

Fans cannot effectively lower core body temperature and should not be used as the primary cooling method. Use fans to help blow cool air to where it is needed. Do not direct fans directly towards people when indoor temperatures are very high (over 35°C).

Indoor temperature thresholds and monitoring:

When updating your heat response plan, consider having temperature actions, for example:

- Standard measures to maintain normal indoor temperatures and prevent indoor temperatures from exceeding 26°C (79°F).
- Escalated measures to take if there is a likelihood of indoor temperatures approaching or exceeding 26°C (79°F).
- **Emergency measures to take if the indoor temperature exceeds 26°C (79°F).**

To implement temperature-based actions, daily monitoring of the indoor temperature will be required throughout the day. The following information provides guidance on how to get the most reliable measurements:

- The larger the facility, the more measurements we recommend taking. We recommend monitoring a minimum of three different locations throughout the building, and more for larger facilities.
 - At least one of these temperatures should be recorded in a common room.
 - At least one of these temperatures should be recorded in a resident bedroom that is expected to have high temperatures (e.g. a south facing room on the top level).
- **Measure the temperature at least once a day** under standard measures and twice a day for escalated and emergency measures. Indoor temperature should be measured in the late afternoon or early evening, when they are expected to be at their daily maximum.

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How to prepare for the heat season?

- Expand your emergency plan to **include a section on extreme heat response**.
- **Prepare staff** to recognize dangerous indoor temperatures, signs of heat illness and when it is an emergency. Ensure staff training includes facility's heat response plan, signs and symptoms of heat-related illnesses and actions to be taken to mitigate the effects of illness and dehydration.
- Have medical staff pre-identify residents who may be at higher risk for heat-related illness. Plan how this list will be updated and shared with relevant staff teams.
- Know where to get official information on heat alerts.
 - Environment Canada [Public Weather Alerts for British Columbia](#)
 - Environment Canada [WeatherCAN App](#)
- Indoor temperatures should remain below 26°C (79°F). Learn about ways to **keep the building cool** when it's hot. Some examples include:

Passive Cooling:

- Place covers on the outside of windows to **block sunlight** (e.g. window shading, glazing, shutters or cardboard covered in tin foil).
- Consider using plants to cool the building. **Plant trees** on the side of the building where the sun shines during the hottest part of the day and **use trees to create shade** in outdoor play spaces. Consider installing a green roof on the building, if possible.
- Identify where fans can be used to **move cool air** to different indoor spaces. See the correct fan use section on page 3.

Active Cooling:

- If passive cooling is not enough to keep your building cool, consider installing an **energy-efficient active cooling system** (i.e. heat pump or air conditioning) to be used on hot days.
- If the building has air conditioning, make sure it works properly before hot weather starts.
- If the entire facility cannot be cooled, consider creating **one or more specific cooling rooms** with air conditioning where residents can cool off for a few hours on hot days.



Identify nearby spaces to visit where residents can cool off for a few hours a day during extreme heat events (e.g. a public library, community center, shaded park). Consider when these spaces could be used and transportation plans.

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What to do during a heat alert?

The following are recommended *options* to help protect health from heat, implement them where feasible and appropriate.

- Check the latest **heat alert information** and weather forecast.
- Inform all staff teams, residents and families/friends when heat alerts are declared, where to find health guidance, and share the heat resources below.
- **Pay close attention to how residents feel and watch for signs of heat-related illness.** Provide staff with clear protocols on what to monitor, such as frequency of checks, signs of heat-related illness and actions to take, especially for non-medical staff. Clearly assign staff responsibilities to monitor residents, indoor temperatures and provide interventions so it is not missed if regular staff are busy or unclear who is responsible.
- Review “[Heat Related Illnesses: Prevention and Management in Long-Term Care](#)” with care staff.
- **Provide and encourage additional fluids** around the clock, particularly water, juices, and popsicles. Consider activities to promote hydration, such as a smoothie or beverage social.

Keep residents and staff cool:

- Encourage residents and staff to **dress for the weather** with loose-fitting, light-coloured and breathable clothing.
- If meals are prepared, where possible plan meals that don't need an oven or stove and consider menu items with more water content.
- Reschedule **outdoor activities to cooler times of the day** and limit sun exposure when outside.
- Remove excess blankets and bedding from residents' beds.

Keep resident and staff spaces cool:

- Keep **shades and blinds** closed during the day.
- If the space does not have air conditioning, **close windows** around **10 a.m.** to keep the cooler air inside and open windows and doors around 8 p.m. to **let the cooler overnight air in** if safe to do so.
- Use multiple fans strategically to help move cooler air indoors overnight if possible.
- **Monitor the indoor temperature.** If the temperature is over 26°C (79°F):
 - Give residents a **break from the heat** by ensuring they spend at least two hours at a time in a cool space, but ideally as much time as possible (e.g. rooms below 26°C, community center, library, tree-shaded outdoor area).
 - **Use water to help residents cool off** (e.g. cool shower or foot bath, apply cool water or wet towels to the skin).



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Do I need a heat plan?

Under the [Residential Care Regulation](#), licensed care facilities are responsible for maintaining a safe environment for people in their care, including safe indoor temperatures. Heat plans explain how a facility will maintain a safe environment and are applicable to:

- Long-term care
- Assisted Living
- Community Living
- Hospice
- Mental health
- Substance use
- Acquired injury
- Child and youth



How to develop a heat plan?

Vancouver Coastal Health and Health Emergency Management BC have developed [heat planning resources](#) for long-term care and assisted living facilities, including plan templates that can be used by other facilities.

Find these resources at the bottom of the VCH Heat Webpage, under Extreme Heat Resources: [Businesses and Licensed Facilities tab](#).

Resources to develop a heat plan:

- [Resource Guide: Heat Planning](#): How to start heat planning and recommended months for each step
- [Heat Response Plan Template](#): Fillable template
- [Site Assessment Checklist](#): Detailed site and clinical checklists to assist in planning

Resources for yearly heat preparedness:

- [Resident Risk Identification Guidance](#): Criteria to identify residents at highest risk from heat
- [Heat Response Preparation Checklist](#): Brief checklist to complete before each heat season

Resources for heat response:

- [Heat Response Temperature Log](#): Temperature recording template to modify for use in your facility
- [Heat Response Checklist](#): Daily readiness check during a heat alert

If you are encountering challenges developing a heat plan or modifying the templates above to your setting, please contact your VCH Licensing Officer to inquire about additional resources.

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Heat Resources

Weather resources:

ECCC: Online Weather Alerts for BC	Online weather alerts. Environment and Climate Change Canada is the weather source used by government, emergency management and the health system.
ECCC: WeatherCAN App	Cell phone notifications for weather alerts. Environment and Climate Change Canada is the weather source used by government, emergency management and the health system.

Health and heat illness resources:

Vancouver Coastal Health: Extreme Heat Fraser Health: Sun Safety	Information for the public, community partners and health professionals regarding extreme heat, including a number of links to fact sheets and resources.
VCH & Providence Health: Heat-related Illness Prevention and Management in Long-term Care	Decision support tool for care staff that outlines how to prevent and manage heat-related illnesses.

Heat season preparedness resources:

PreparedBC: Extreme Heat Preparedness Guide	Plain language guide on how to plan for heat season and what to do during a heat event (translated).
Towards the Heart: Harm Reduction and Heat	See resource list under Harm Reduction: Extreme Weather Events. Information for people who use substances, people with schizophrenia and service providers.
Health Facilities Preparation for Extreme Heat, Community Care During Extreme Heat	Health Canada resources: Recommendations for effective health facility management to protect staff and patients. Fact sheet for Health Care Workers working in community care.

Want to learn more?

Check out these other guidance documents for community care facilities:

