

Heatwave precautions for babies and young children

The Royal Women's Hospital Fact Sheet / www.thewomens.org.au



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Anyone can suffer from heat-related illness; babies and young children are particularly at risk.

Others at risk are:

- pregnant and nursing mothers
- people who are physically unwell, especially with heart disease, high blood pressure or lung disease
- people on medications for mental illness
- people over 65 years.

What to look for

Babies and young children should be watched carefully during hot weather. They can quickly lose body fluids through perspiring, which can lead to dehydration. They need to drink regularly, wear light clothing and be kept cool.

Babies and young children may not show early signs and symptoms of the effects of heat. They may just look unwell or be more irritable than usual. Babies may seem floppy, have drier skin, and refuse to drink, or have fewer wet nappies than usual. The soft spot on top of a baby's head (fontanelle) may also be lower than usual.

Steps to keep babies safe during the extreme heat

- During hot weather, breastfed babies may need extra breastfeeds. Breastfeeding mums don't need to give very young babies extra water during a heatwave as the breast milk provides their babies with all they need, although mums should make sure they drink plenty of fluids.
- Don't leave babies to sleep in a pram in hot weather – prams can be hot and airless. Make sure air can circulate around your baby – for example:
 - remove any padding around the cot
 - cover mattresses and waterproof sheets with thick layers of cotton sheets to absorb perspiration and prevent prickly heat rash
 - avoid using a pillow or mattress that your baby sinks down into
 - put your baby to bed in just a nappy.

- Avoid taking your baby or young child outside in extreme temperatures. If you must travel, take care in the car during hot weather.
 - Never cover a baby capsule in a car with a rug or towel to shade from the sun as this will restrict air moving around the baby, which will make them hotter.
 - Use sunshades on windows.
 - Never leave babies or young children alone in a car, no matter what the weather (even in mild weather cars quickly become too hot for small children).
 - Try to make trips in the coolest part of the day.
- If you use a fan, don't point it towards the baby, but use it to keep the air circulating. If you have an air-conditioner, make sure the room does not get too cold (about 24 to 26 degrees Celsius is low enough).
- If you do not have a fan or air conditioner, you can cover your baby's or toddler's body with cool damp cloths. You can also place wet towels or sheets around the bassinette or cot to cool the air near them. Check on your baby regularly to make sure they are not getting too cold.

Sick babies and children need special care in hot weather

Even minor illnesses, such as colds or gastroenteritis, need special care in hot weather. These illnesses often lead to a slight rise in temperature by themselves, but in hot weather this could lead to dehydration.

Frequent breastfeeding and extra drinks are important if your baby is ill. To cool a baby's or a child's hot body, try frequent lukewarm baths – NEVER cold – or sponge your baby or child down with a cool face washer. Seek help if there is no improvement or if you are worried.



Where to get help

- **In an emergency, call triple zero (000)**
- Your doctor – if you, or someone you know, may be suffering from a heat-related illness
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Maternal and Child Health Line, Victoria Tel. 132 229 (24 hours)
- St John Ambulance Australia – for more information on first aid <http://stjohn.org.au>

Tips for all Victorians to stay safe during the extreme heat

- Drink plenty of water, even if you do not feel thirsty (if your doctor normally limits your fluids, check how much to drink during hot weather). Eat smaller meals more often and eat cold meals such as salads. Make sure food that needs refrigeration is properly stored.
- Keep yourself cool by using wet towels on your arms or neck, putting your feet in cool water and taking cool (not cold) showers. Block out the sun during the day by closing curtains and blinds. Open windows when there is a cool breeze. Avoid strenuous activity like sport, home improvements and gardening.
- Stay out of the sun during the hottest part of the day. If you must go out, stay in the shade and take plenty of water with you. Wear a hat and light-coloured, loose-fitting clothing. Spend as much time as possible in cool or air-conditioned buildings (for example, shopping centres, libraries, cinemas or community centres).

For more health information about staying safe during hot weather, visit:
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au