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Maine Health Alert Network (HAN) System

PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

To: All HAN Recipients

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Subject: **Health Risks from Extreme Heat this Week**

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Health Risks from Extreme Heat this Week

Maine will experience extremely hot and humid weather this week. The Maine CDC would like to remind health care providers, caregivers, and public health professionals to identify those in their care at increased risk and advise them to take precautions to prevent heat illness.

Health care providers should remind patients and their caregivers about the importance of seeking medical attention for heat-related illnesses and discuss prevention methods. Residential care facilities should monitor their residents carefully for signs of heat illness, especially if the facility is not air conditioned.

Summary

Maine will experience extreme hot and humid weather this week, with the National Weather Service issuing Heat Advisories for York County from Wednesday through Friday, and for much of Southern and Central Maine on Thursday. Temperatures will remain high overnight, limiting people's ability to recover from daytime heat exposure. These weather conditions can cause heat-related illnesses such as heat stroke, exacerbate other chronic health conditions, and, in turn, lead to severe complications and even death. Since extreme heat is infrequent in Maine and home air conditioning rates are very low, residents are not well-adapted to such exposures. These factors put Mainers at risk of heat-related illness. Many Mainers are additionally more vulnerable to heat because of older age or chronic health conditions. Heat waves in Maine can trigger significant morbidity; in late July of this year, a 3-day period of hot weather resulted in 80 emergency department visits for heat-related illnesses across the state.

Recommendations for Providers and Caregivers

The Maine CDC reminds health care providers, caregivers, and public health professionals to identify people at increased risk (see checklist at right or visit: https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/environmental-health/heat/at-risk-groups.html) and advise them to take precautions to prevent heat illness. Air conditioning is the most effective protection during a heat wave. Remind at-risk patients and caregivers about the importance of seeking medical care for heat-related illness and educate them on ways to stay cool, hydrated, and safe while also preventing transmission of COVID-19. Patients should not let COVID-19 stop them from accessing medical care for heat-related illnesses.

People at High Risk for Heat-Related Illness

- ☐ Older persons (age 65 and older)
- ☐ Infants and young children
- ☐ People with a mental illness
- ☐ People who are under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- ☐ People who work outside or in a hot environment
- ☐ Pregnant women
- ☐ People with a chronic disease, such as heart disease, kidney disease, diabetes, obesity, or high blood pressure
- ☐ People who are socially isolated or who have limited mobility
- ☐ People living in poverty or experiencing homelessness

During hot weather, providers and caregivers should monitor anyone in their care and:

- Check in twice a day on older persons and people who cannot care for themselves,
- Encourage them to drink more fluids,
- Look for signs of heat illness, especially heat exhaustion and heat stroke,
- Make sure they have access to air conditioning (if not at home, then consider a local cooling center; call 211 for locations),
- Talk with their health care provider about appropriate fluid intake if they take medications, and
- Never leave anyone, especially children, pets, or those with special needs, in a parked car – even briefly – as temperatures in the car can become dangerous within a few minutes.

In addition, residential care facilities should monitor residents very carefully for signs of heat illness, especially if the facility is not air conditioned.

Recommendations for Individuals

Key recommendations for individuals are to **keep cool**, **drink fluids**, and **lie low**; more detailed and specific recommendations can be found here: https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/environmental-health/heat/keepcool.html. Providers should share these detailed recommendations with patients.

Mitigation of COVID-19 Risk During Heat Events

Mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission and the risk of heat-related illness by providing the following advice:

- Guide people without air conditioning to consider family, friends, or neighbors with air conditioning who they can visit even for a couple of hours,
- Instruct people not to visit others if they have symptoms of COVID-19 or have tested positive for COVID-19 and are still isolating. Recommend they confirm no one in the household they will be visiting is sick, isolating for COVID-19, or at high risk for severe COVID-19 illness,
- If seeking cooling outside the home, advise patients to follow local masking guidance
- If masks are required indoors, advise patients to choose lightweight, cotton fabrics and to change the mask if it gets damp. Hot weather will make masks more uncomfortable.

Recognizing and Managing Heat Illness

Heat illnesses include heat stroke (hyperthermia), heat exhaustion, dehydration, heat syncope, heat cramps, heat rash, and sunburn. Heat stroke and heat exhaustion are the most severe of these and distinguishing between them is important for appropriate treatment (see below).

Heat Stroke	Heat Exhaustion
Hot, dry, red skin; no sweating	Heavy sweating
Rapid pulse	Fainting
Body temperature above 105° F	Nausea, vomiting
Headache	Cold, pale, clammy skin
Rapid and shallow breathing	Headache
Loss of alertness, confusion	Dizziness
Unconsciousness or coma	Weakness
If you see someone with these signs, call 911 immediately and move the person to a cool or shady place. Loosen their clothes and cool them rapidly with ice, fans, cool water, wet cloths, or ice water immersion.	**If you see someone with these signs, move the person to a cool place, have them drink fluids and rest, loosen their clothes, and cool them off with water or wet cloths. Heat exhaustion can quickly lead to heat stroke. Get medical help if symptoms worsen or do not improve.**

Additional Background

Heat is a serious public health threat. Over the past 30 years in the U.S., more people have died from heat than from all other weather events combined. Prolonged hot weather can be especially deadly; more than 200 people died in a 10-day heat wave in Washington and Oregon earlier this summer.

Studies have shown that people who live in northern climates like Maine are more susceptible to heat than people in southern climates and are affected at lower temperatures. This is likely because people in northern climates are less adapted to heat, and do not have good access to air-conditioned spaces. Only around 50% of Maine homes have any air conditioning – much lower than the rest of New England, where around 85% of homes have air conditioning.

The Maine CDC has found evidence of heat-related health effects in Maine. Rates of hospitalizations and Emergency Department (ED) visits for all causes – as well as for direct heat illness, heart attacks, cardiovascular diseases, kidney diseases, and diabetes – were significantly higher during the hottest days of the last decade than during the cooler days. During recent heat waves, particularly in 2018 and earlier in 2021, Maine CDC saw notable increases in hospitalizations and ED visits for heat illnesses.

For more information:

- Maine CDC Heat Illness Information
  http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/environmental-health/heat/index.html
- Current Heat Index Conditions and Forecast (click on your location for up-to-date information)
  http://www.weather.gov
- US CDC Extreme Heat Prevention Guide
  http://emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/extremeheat/heat_guide.asp
- Maine Tracking Network (for near real-time data on heat illness emergency department visits)
  https://data.mainepublichealth.gov/tracking