

Extreme heat safety for pregnant people and those who have recently delivered

Very hot weather is becoming more common in the summer months as the B.C. climate changes. Under some conditions the humidity can also be high, which makes the weather feel even hotter, especially for people who do not have access to air conditioning at home. Extreme heat happens when there are two or more consecutive days when daytime temperatures are much higher than we would expect during normal summer days.

Extreme heat can be harmful to anyone's health, but people who are pregnant or who recently had a baby may be at higher risk, especially if they do not have access to a cool indoor environment. Weight normally gained during pregnancy can make it harder for the body to maintain a safe body temperature in hot weather – this can lead to heat-related illness.

Extreme heat may raise the risk of complications during pregnancy. Staying cool will minimize heat-related risks.

Extreme heat can be harmful to anyone's health, but infants (0-1 year) and young children (1-5 years) may be at higher risk of heat-related illness, especially if they do not have access to a cool indoor environment. For more information visit, [HealthLinkBC File #35b Safety for infants and young children during extreme heat](#).

Heat can build up indoors when the outdoor temperatures are high. Prolonged exposure to indoor heat over 26°C can be risky, and over 31°C can be dangerous. If it gets very hot in your home, plan to go somewhere cooler if possible.

If you experience heat-related symptoms (below is a list) or increased contractions, it is important to speak with your registered midwife, family physician, or obstetrician. You can also call HealthLink BC at **8-1-1** anytime to talk with a registered nurse.

What can you do to keep safe?

Stay in a cool space

- Use central or portable air conditioning (AC) if you have it. A temperature of less than 26°C is safe for most people
- Indoor temperatures over 31°C for long periods can be dangerous. Keep a digital room thermometer with you to help you know when your home is getting too hot
- Monitor weather and temperature forecasts for your area through news outlets and/or with online tools and apps on mobile phone and associated websites
- If you do not have an air-conditioned space in your home, consider staying with friends or family who have air conditioning if your home gets too hot
- Spend time in local cooling centres or community spaces, such as libraries or malls
- Sleep in the coolest room in your home, even if it is not your bedroom
- Close windows during the heat of the day to trap cooler air inside
- Cover windows by using shutters, blinds, drapes, blankets or sheets to keep sun out during the day
- If the temperature drops at night and it is safe, open windows to let cool air in
- If you have a fan, use it to move air around the room. Try putting an ice tray in front of the fan. Keep in mind that fans might not help to lower your core body temperature when it is very hot
- Turn off lights and electronic devices that are not in use to avoid any extra heat
- Use your oven or stove as little as possible because this can make your home hotter

Keep your body cool and hydrated

- Drink plenty of water and other fluids (about 3-4 litres of water a day), especially if you are breast or chest-feeding and even if you do not feel thirsty
- Avoid drinking large amounts of caffeinated, sugary or artificially sweetened and alcoholic drinks
- Eat fruits and vegetables. They have a high water content and can help keep you hydrated
- Take a cool shower or bath, or try a sponge or foot bath. You can also use a personal spray bottle with cool water
- Try using a cold pack or wrap. You can also wear a damp shawl or shirt
- Use a damp sheet at night
- Wear light-coloured, loose-fitting, breathable clothing, sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat if you are outside
- Protect exposed skin by wearing sunscreen with broad-spectrum coverage and SPF of at least 30
- Lower activity levels and avoid intense activity

If you are breast or chest feeding

- Try to limit your caffeine intake to 300 mg per day (about 1 1/2 cups of coffee) and no alcohol intake
- If you are tandem feeding or feeding during pregnancy, it's important for you to stay hydrated. Try having a cool, non-alcoholic, low-sugar drink during every feed in addition to other drinks throughout the day

Keep out of the heat

- If you have to go outside, try to stay in cooler, breezier areas like large, shaded parks or spaces with water features and lots of trees
- Try to plan activities, such as going to appointments, during the cooler morning and evening hours. This might make it easier to stay inside in a cool place during the hottest hours of the day
- If you work outside or in an environment that does not have a good cooling system, such as air conditioning, talk to a health care provider or workplace safety officer to find out what

measures exist to reduce your risk of heat-related illness

What are symptoms of mild to moderate heat-related illness?

Some symptoms of mild to moderate heat-related illness include:

- Irritability
- Thirst or dry mouth
- Fast heart rate even when resting
- Feeling generally unwell
- Heavy sweating
- Muscle cramps
- Heat rash or heat edema (swelling)
- Swelling, especially in hands and feet
- Fatigue, weakness and malaise
- Feeling light-headed or dizzy
- Headache
- Disorientation
- Peeing less with darker urine than usual
- Body temperature of greater than 38°C (100°F)
- Nausea that is new or different than any pre-existing nausea in pregnancy

Most mild to moderate heat-related illnesses, sometimes called heat exhaustion, can be treated at home if they are caught early. If you are showing signs of mild to moderate heat-related illness, start cooling yourself down right away. If your symptoms last longer than one hour, change, worsen or cause you concern, contact a health care provider. If you are unsure about your symptoms, you can call HealthLink BC at **8-1-1** anytime to speak with a registered nurse.

What are symptoms of severe heat-related illness?

Some symptoms of severe heat-related illness include:

- Hot and flushed or very pale skin
- Not sweating
- Unusual confusion and decreased mental alertness
- Severe nausea and/or vomiting

- Fainting or loss of consciousness
- Increased heart rate and rapid, shallow breathing
- Feeling lethargic
- Difficulty speaking
- Unusual coordination problems
- Peeing very little, and urine is very dark
- Body temperature of greater than 39°C (102°F)

Call **9-1-1** or your local emergency number if you suspect a severe heat-related illness and keep trying to cool yourself or the individual you are caring for until help arrives. While waiting for help to arrive, cool the person by:

- Moving them to a cool place, if you can
- Removing excess clothing
- Applying cold water, wet towels or ice packs around the body, especially the neck, armpits and groin

Signs of heat-related illness can be similar to other complications that can arise during pregnancy and the postpartum period. Many pregnant people have lower blood pressure during early pregnancy. Warm conditions bring blood to the skin to get rid of excess heat, potentially making blood pressure even lower. This can result in headaches, feeling light-headed or even fainting. Any of the symptoms of heat-related illness can be worsened if the person has underlying conditions such as obesity, kidney disease or heart disease, or mental illness.

Contact your healthcare provider or go to the hospital right away if you experience:

- Decreased fetal movement
- A trickle or gush of fluid or bleeding from your vagina that doesn't stop after going to the bathroom
- Stomach pains or bad cramps that won't go away
- Unusual lower back pain or pressure
- Contractions that don't go away when you walk, rest or take a warm shower
- A feeling that something isn't right

Many pregnant people experience Braxton Hicks contractions (or tightening in the abdomen that comes and goes). Dehydration can make these

worse. Hot weather may cause preterm birth. It is important that anyone who experiences more tightening in the abdomen than usual should be checked by their midwife, doctor or obstetrician.

B.C.'s heat alert warning system

The B.C. Heat Alert and Response System, or BC HARS, defines two categories of heat events – heat warning and the more dangerous extreme heat emergency – triggered by specific temperature ranges to initiate recommended response actions. Environment and Climate Change Canada issues the alerts, and you can sign up to get heat push notifications to your smartphones through the [WeatherCAN app](#) for any or all of the pre-selected locations.

For more information

For more information on extreme heat, visit PreparedBC - Extreme Heat Preparedness Guide www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/public-safety-and-emergency-services/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/embc/preparedbc/preparedbc-guides/preparedbc_extreme_heat_guide.pdf

For more information on heat-related illness and keeping children safe during extreme heat, visit:

- [HealthLinkBC File #35 Heat-related illness](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #35b Safety for infants and young children during extreme heat](#)

For more information on foods and drinks to limit or avoid during pregnancy or breast or chest-feeding, please visit:

- [Baby's Best Chance](#) (PDF 5.1MB)
- [HealthLinkBC File #38d Pregnancy and alcohol use](#)

For information about preterm labour, please visit:

- [HealthLink BC: Stages of labour](#)

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/more/resources/healthlink-bc-files or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.