



THE PARTNERSHIP
FOR INCLUSIVE DISASTER STRATEGIES

Plain Language Edition

Cooling the Crisis:

Heat emergencies and people with intellectual developmental disabilities

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This factsheet is about heat safety for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD).

How can I tell if I am getting hurt by the heat?

Heat can be dangerous for everyone. Here are some signs you are getting too hot:

- Feeling tired or dizzy
- Muscle cramps
- Feeling like you might throw up
- Feeling like you need to use more energy to do things

These signs can get even worse if you don't have enough to drink. If you get too hot for too long, you could have to go to the hospital or even die.

Why can heat be more dangerous for people with I/DD?

People with disabilities are more likely to be hurt by heat. Some disabilities, like spinal cord injuries, make it harder for the body to cool down. But heat is also a problem because of ableism. **Ableism** is when someone gets treated unfairly because of their disability.

Studies show that people with disabilities are more likely to get hurt by heat than people without disabilities. People with I/DD are more likely to get hurt by heat than people with other kinds of disabilities. Here are some reasons why:

Communication

Information about heat is usually not in plain language. That means people with I/DD might not know what to do if they get too hot. Caretakers and support workers sometimes also don't realize if someone has gotten too hot.

It can be hard for non-speaking people to communicate that the heat is making

them feel sick. This is a reason why AAC is important for safety. AAC stands for “Augmentative and alternative communication.” **AAC** means any way of communicating other than speaking with your mouth or using sign language. Some kinds of AAC are writing, pointing to pictures or words, and typing words on a computer.

Where people with I/DD live and work

Many people with I/DD live in institutions or group homes. Sometimes these institutions don’t have good air conditioning, and it gets very hot inside. If that happens, everyone who lives there can get sick.

There are also lots of people with I/DD in prisons and jails. Heat is a very serious problem in jails and prisons. Sometimes the heat kills people in jails and prisons. This goes against people’s rights.

People with disabilities are also more likely to not have enough money to meet everyday needs. Air conditioning is expensive, and sometimes people can’t afford it. Cheaper houses and apartments might not have air conditioning at all. And cheaper houses are usually in neighborhoods with less trees and shade.

Some types of jobs also have to deal with heat more. Jobs where people spend a lot of time outside have to deal with heat more. These can be jobs in farms or gardens, or doing yard work. Some jobs that happen indoors can also deal with heat. Usually these are jobs where people have to move a lot in a closed room without good air conditioning. Sometimes jobs in factories or warehouses can have these heat problems. A lot of people with I/DD who work have jobs like these.

Health problems and medications

People with I/DD are more likely to have heart problems. Heart problems can make heat even more dangerous.

Many people with I/DD take medications. But medications have side effects.

Some medications have side effects that make heat more dangerous. They make it harder to cool down when it's hot. Some kinds of medication that can make heat more dangerous are:

- Depression medication
- ADHD medication
- High blood pressure medication
- Medication for heart problems
- Seizure medication

Talk to your doctor about whether your medications could cause problems with heat. But you should not stop taking your medication unless a doctor tells you to.

How do I stay safe in a heat emergency?

The most important thing to do to stay safe in the heat is to have a plan. Talk to the people you live with about what to do if a heat emergency happens. Get supplies to help with heat, like water bottles, fans, and things to make shade. You should also plan for how you will let others know if you feel too hot. For example, if you use AAC, you can have a phrase ready that says "I am feeling too hot."

Make sure to drink water many times a day, and whenever you feel thirsty. Water is always a good choice to drink.

If you are sweating a lot, you can also have a snack with water, or try a sports drink like Gatorade. You don't only lose water when you sweat, you also lose salt. Food and sports drinks replace salt that also comes out of your body when you sweat. Your body needs salt for your brain and muscles to work. You can get very sick if you don't have enough salt.

Always wear sunscreen when you go outside.

Pay attention to how you are feeling. Tell people right away if you feel sick. Go to Urgent Care or the ER if you need to.

If you can't stay safe at home, there may be a cooling center near you. Cooling centers are places with air conditioning that anyone can go to cool off. You can look up "(Your city) cooling center" to find one near you.

How can I get help getting air conditioning?

In some states, Medicaid will pay for air conditioning if you need it for a medical reason. These states are:

- California
- Colorado
- Florida
- Massachusetts
- Michigan
- Minnesota
- New Jersey
- New York
- North Carolina
- Texas
- Washington DC

There is a federal program called the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (**LIHEAP**). In some states and territories, LIHEAP helps make air conditioning cheaper for people who can't afford it. The places that have LIHEAP for air conditioning are:

- Alabama
- American Samoa

- Arizona
- Arkansas
- California
- Delaware
- Florida
- Georgia
- Hawaii
- Kentucky
- Louisiana
- Northern Mariana Islands
- Oklahoma
- Oregon
- Puerto Rico
- South Carolina
- Tennessee
- Texas
- Utah
- Virginia
- West Virginia
- Washington DC

Other ways to stay cool

- If you do not have air conditioning, there are still ways to cool your body down:
- Put a cold, wet cloth on your neck, wrists, or forehead.
- Take a cool shower or bath if you can.
- Wear light, loose clothing and stay in the shade when you are outside.
- Close curtains or blinds during the day to keep heat out.
- Try to stay on the lowest floor of a building if possible.

Be careful when using fans. Having the fan on when it's really hot can make you feel even hotter. But putting a bowl of cold water in front of a fan can make the air cooler. You can sit in front of a fan with a bowl of cold water to get cooler.

Places that may help

If you need help during heat emergencies, these places may have information that can help you:

- Centers for Independent Living (CILs): CILs help people with disabilities live independently in their communities. They may help you find resources or make a plan.
- 211: You can call 211 in many places to ask about cooling centers, food/water, housing help, and other services.
- Local health departments or city services (sometimes 311): They may share information about heat warnings and cooling centers.
- Disability Rights organizations: They can help if a group home, institution, or housing provider is putting disabled people in danger from the heat.

- State Developmental Disabilities (DD) Councils: DD Councils work to make better services and supports for people with I/DD. They may help connect you to resources or advocacy in your state.
- State Developmental Disabilities (DD) Agencies: They may help connect you to supports, services, and emergency resources.
- Disability & Disaster Hotline: You can call (800) 626-4959 to get help in case of disasters and weather emergencies. The hotline connects disabled people with information, resources, and support.