

Heatwave advice – for childcare facilities

Although we all love the warmer weather, it is particularly important to keep a close eye on children during heatwaves. Children don't sweat as much as adults do – so they find it harder to stay cool. The children under your care may need extra help to stay cool. Some children may need more help than others, especially children under 4, those with certain medical needs or special needs and those children living with overweight or obesity. The main risk for children during heat waves is dehydration. But being too hot for too long can sometimes cause heat exhaustion or heatstroke which is dangerous for children.

Tips to help the children under your care to stay healthy in the heat:

1. **Make sure they are drinking enough fluids**

- If you are caring for babies under 6 months, offer them their usual milk feeds (breast milk or formula) more often. This will prevent them becoming dehydrated.
- Give older children plenty of cold drinks, especially if they are exercising or playing outside.
- Make sure cold drinks (such as water) are readily available for children, and encourage them to drink. Cold fruit, cold milk and smoothies can be a way of getting fluids into children who are reluctant to drink water.
- Encourage children to eat normally.

2. **Ask parents to dress their children in loose clothing**

- A sun hat will also protect their child from the sun
- You can sprinkle water over the children's skin or clothes when they are playing outside to help them stay cool.

3. **Keep indoor spaces cool**

- Open windows as early as possible before the children arrive to your facility, this will allow stored heat to escape from the building.
- As it gets warmer outside, once the air outside is warmer than the air inside, partially open windows.
- Close the curtains or blinds in indoor spaces during the day to block out the sun but don't let closed blinds block ventilation.
- Switch off lights, and all electric equipment that you are not using, like laptops and printers.

- Use a room thermometer to ensure that nap rooms or sleep rooms are at the correct temperature. We recommend that rooms in which babies or children sleep are at 16 degrees C to 20 degrees C. Children should not sleep in direct sunlight.

4. Tips for playing outdoors

- Make sure that children take a break from the heat at times.
- They should relax from time to time in a cool place such as inside, or an area outside that is in the shade.
- Avoid very active or vigorous outdoor play when the temperature is > 30°C
- You might need to think about changing your usual schedule for outdoor play, to avoid children being outdoors during very hot weather.
- Plastic outdoor equipment like slides and mats can get very hot in the heat, check them before a child uses them as they can cause burns.

5. Protect children's skin from the sun

- Communicate with all parents and ask them to apply sunscreen to their children before they bring them to your facility. Ask them to send sunscreen with their child in a labelled container.
- Review your facility's sun policy.
- Children should stay in the shade especially between 11am – 3pm.
- You can use a sun shade on a baby's pram to protect them, but never cover it completely. Air needs to circulate.
- For older children, keep them in the shade and protect their skin with broad spectrum sunscreen that is SPF 30 or higher. But remember, sunscreen will protect a child's skin from the sun, but it won't protect them from the heat.

6. Never leave children alone in cars or mini-buses

- Never leave children alone in the car for any length of time, no matter how short, even if your car is in the shade.

7. Children with health needs

- If a child in your care has additional health needs or special needs, ask the parents if there are any special recommendations for their child, or if they are more at risk from the heat

8. More information about children's health

- Check out the HSE website mychild.ie to find out more about the signs of dehydration, heat exhaustion and heatstroke.

How will you know if a child is dehydrated?

The symptoms of dehydration (not having enough fluid in your body) are similar in children and adults. Thirst is an early sign that children need extra fluids, if a child is thirsty give them a drink. Another sign to watch out for is a baby or toddler having fewer wet nappies than usual; or their nappies not feeling as heavy (or being as wet) as usual. Older children may be peeing less often.

If a baby you are caring for is less than 6 months old, inform the parents if you think they are becoming dehydrated. The parents will need to speak to their GP or Emergency Department.

If children develop any of the signs or symptoms below, they will need medical help. Please inform their parents immediately or, in emergency situations, follow your usual procedures. These symptoms include children that:

- seem drowsy (hard to wake)
- are breathing fast
- have few or no tears when they cry
- the soft spot on their head sinks inwards (sunken fontanelle)
- have a dry mouth
- have dark yellow pee or have not had a pee in last 12 hours
- have less than 3 wet nappies in a day
- have cold and blotchy-looking hands and feet
- are extremely thirsty despite regular drinks
- are unusually pale
- have less energy than usual
- are confused

How will I know if a child is developing heat exhaustion?

Heat exhaustion is an illness that can happen in the heat. It can develop into heat stroke which is dangerous. To prevent heat stroke, it is important to cool a child down if you think they have heat exhaustion.

Children with heat exhaustion are usually irritable and cranky. Other signs of heat exhaustion in children include:

- intense thirst
- weakness or fainting
- cramps in the arms, legs or tummy
- no appetite, feeling sick or vomiting
- complaining of a headache
- sweating a lot
- pale clammy skin
- temperature of greater than 38 °C

Children with heat exhaustion may not have all of these symptoms, so it is important to be alert for any signs of heat exhaustion.

If you think a child may be suffering from heat exhaustion:

1. Get them to rest in a cool place, ideally indoors in a room with air conditioning, or in the shade.
2. Give them fluids to drink. This should be cool water. Avoid caffeine.
3. Cool their skin with cold water.
4. Inform their parents as per your guidelines.

Heatstroke

Heatstroke is a medical emergency. It can be life-threatening. Children's bodies heat up much faster than adults', so children are more at risk from heat stroke. If a child is not able to cool their body down, their body gets hotter and hotter. This causes their temperature to rise. In severe cases this can damage their brains. This is why, if a child has heatstroke, they need treatment quickly. This will bring their temperature down.

Call an ambulance, 999 or 112, if a child has any signs of heatstroke.

The signs of heatstroke include:

- A child you have been treating for heat exhaustion who is no better after 30 minutes.
- Child feels hot and dry. They are not sweating even though they are too hot.

- Severe headache.
- Temperature of 40°C or higher.
- Confusion
- Has a seizure (fit)
- Loss of consciousness.
- Unresponsive.

While you are waiting for the ambulance:

1. Bring the child indoors if possible, or into the shade away from the heat.
2. Undress the child and sponge or spray their skin with cool water (25 to 30 °C). Cool them as rapidly as you can. Place cold packs around their neck and armpits.
3. If they are awake and acting normally, get them to drink a cold drink. If they are not responsive or are drowsy do not force them to drink.

Thankfully heatstroke is rare. By following the advice above, you can help the children under your care enjoy the sunshine while making sure they stay as safe as possible.