Climate change is increasing the risk of heatwaves: preparing for a warm and dry summer in the European Region

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As climate change is projected to significantly increase people's exposure to heatwaves, and European weather services are expecting summers to be warmer and drier, WHO/Europe calls on countries to take measures to avoid adverse health impacts.

In the past 50 years, almost 150 000 people in the WHO European Region lost their lives due to extreme temperatures. According to the World Meteorological Organization, 1672 recorded climate- and weather-related disasters took more than 159 000 lives and generated US$ 476.5 billion in economic damages in the Region over the past 50 years. Although 38% of disasters were attributed to floods and 32% to storms, extreme temperatures accounted for 93% of deaths.

Every year, high temperatures affect the health of many people, particularly older people, infants, people who work outdoors and those who are chronically ill. Heat can trigger exhaustion or heat stroke and exacerbate existing conditions such as cardiovascular, respiratory and kidney diseases, as well as mental health problems.

In a report published last February, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated that heat is a growing health risk due to burgeoning urbanization, an increase in high-temperature extremes, and demographic changes in countries with ageing populations, like most WHO European Member States.

These short-term responses can complement other long-term projects, such as urban planning and design that mitigate urban heat island effects.

The adverse health effects of hot weather are primarily preventable

through sound public health practices. During the 2022 European Public Health Week, WHO/Europe is launching its annual #KeepCool campaign to remind all people that during periods of hot weather, it is essential to keep cool to avoid negative health effects.

While taking care of yourself, plan to check on family, friends and neighbours who spend much of their time alone. Vulnerable people might need assistance on hot days. If anyone you know is at risk, help him or her to get advice and support.

If you or others are dizzy, weak, anxious, intensely thirsty or have a headache, seek help. Move to a cool place as soon as possible and measure your body temperature. Drink water or fruit juice to rehydrate. If you have painful muscular spasms, rest immediately in a cool place, drink oral rehydration solutions containing electrolytes and seek help if the heat cramps last more than an hour.

Consult your doctor if you feel unusual symptoms or if symptoms persist. If someone has hot, dry skin and delirium, is experiencing convulsions, or is unconscious, call a doctor or an ambulance immediately.

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