



Stay on the Safe Side in Summer Heat and Smog



By Constance Washington, RN and Care Coordinator, VNS Health Plans, Aug 15, 2023

The [record high](#) heat this summer, alongside the number of days this season with [dangerous air quality conditions](#), has many of us double-checking our calendars in the hopes that fall weather will soon be here. Unfortunately, it has become increasingly common for elevated temperatures to go hand in hand with elevated levels of air pollution. While we are all looking forward to temperatures going down, it has never been more important to take steps to lessen chances of overheating and limit exposure to poor air quality. Smog, ozone, and even smoke from distant forest fires can make breathing difficult and can increase the risk of heart attack and stroke.

Having worked as a home health care nurse, and now as a Care Coordinator with the nonprofit [VNS Health](#), I know firsthand how high heat, humidity and poor air quality can affect our patients and health plan members, even those who are homebound. It can be tough to keep New Yorkers (and their homes) cool during the summer, so here are some important strategies for staying on the safe side during the August heat!

- **When going outside** be mindful of the environment and the time of day. While some tasks are unavoidable, do your best to schedule outings or prolonged journeys for early in the morning or late in the day. Pavement and metal trap heat, so city streets may be as much as 10°F hotter than the suburbs. Trees can often help lower temperature, so try to stick to streets with trees or shade. If you must go out outside during times of peak temperature, be sure to bring a water

bottle, hat, sunscreen, and loose, light-colored clothing to further stave off the heat. For an extra layer of safety, check beforehand where the closest city [cooling center is](#).

- **Knowing the signs** of heat exhaustion and heat stroke is important so you can quickly act if you or a loved one might be in a dangerous situation. According to the CDC, [symptoms](#) like dizziness, nausea, changes in pulse, and headache, are signs you may need medical attention.
- **Check with the experts before walking out the door!** It is not always obvious at first whether the air quality is low. Before going out for the day, you should check reliable sources for more information, like 311, reports on local news, or reputable websites like [airnow.gov](#).
- **The best way to limit exposure to poor air quality** is to reduce time outside and limit strenuous activities. The ability to take on more demanding activities depends on your individual level of risk, and individuals with heart disease and respiratory illnesses like asthma should be [especially careful](#).
- **Masking up makes a difference.** When air quality is poor, wearing a high-quality mask (e.g., N95) can reduce exposure to harmful pollutants. The city is already making masks available at FDNY firehouses and NYPD precincts and are looking to expand supplies to more vulnerable communities.
- **Staying hydrated** is one of the most consistent ways to keep your temperature regulated. Water is the best way to stay hydrated, with experts encouraging adults to drink 6-8 glasses a day. Always bring a water bottle along with you when going out, and freezing it the night before can help it stay cool longer. If the taste of water is not for you, there are many safe over-the-counter electrolyte additives you can put in your water to make it tastier. Want to elevate that glass of water? Try cutting up your favorite fruit, like a lemon or orange and throw them into a pitcher of water to have on hand when thirst calls! It is also worth noting that not all beverages are created equal—as much as we all love our morning coffee, beverages containing caffeine, including tea and soda, can dehydrate you further.
- **A quick way to bring down body temperature is by** taking a cool (lukewarm, not ice-cold!) shower or bath, but this is not always possible especially for individuals with mobility issues or those at work. Simply keeping a damp cloth nearby or putting your feet in a bowl of cool water is a straightforward way to lower body temperature quickly.

The weather this summer has been undeniably tough for all of us, but one thing you can say about New Yorkers is that we are committed to enjoying all the city has to offer, rain OR shine! With proper precautions and safety planning, especially for our vulnerable neighbors and loved ones, we can all enjoy the city year-round and help each other stay healthy.

To learn more about home health care services and solutions at VNS Health, visit [vnshealth.org](#) or call 1-866-986-7691.

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