
Heat and Overdose

At a Glance

- Overdose deaths spike when it's hot outside
- It's only getting hotter.
- Doctors can do something about it.

Summary

- Recent study from Yale looked at 20 years of data.
- Every 1°C (about 2°F) increase in the heat index creates a measurable, predictable increase in overdose mortality from use of opioids, cocaine, and methamphetamine, alone or in combination.
- Link: [Heat Exposure and Drug Overdose Mortality in the United States](#)

How do heat and overdose interact to increase mortality?

- Heat can act through chronic conditions like mental illness, cardiovascular disease, or diabetes to increase mortality in people who use drugs.
- Opioids depress the body's natural heat response and keep people from seeking cooler environments.
- People need higher doses of opioids to get the same effect when it's hot outside.
- Cocaine and methamphetamines increase core body temperature while simultaneously masking the body's natural discomfort signals.
- "Overamping" — the clinical term for a stimulant overdose — occurs more frequently and at much lower doses when the weather climbs above 24°C (about 75°F,) leading to extremely high body temperatures and strain on the heart.
- When substances are used together, the risks only multiply.
- Links:
 - [Information for Harm Reduction Organizations](#)
 - [Alcohol and substance use in extreme environment temperatures](#)

What can doctors do?

- Talk to patients about increased risks of overdose when it's hot outside
 - Warn patients that their tolerance may decrease during the heat.
 - Remind patients to use only in indoor, cool spaces.
 - To them to never use in a car – they can become dangerously hot in minutes.
 - Ask patients how they cool their homes or if they have a cool place to go.
 - Share [patient heat toolkits](#) in your clinic or hospital.
 - Link: [Patient Toolkits](#)
- Incorporate heat into diagnosis – [National Weather Service Infographic](#)
 - Know the signs of heat stroke and heat exhaustion and educate your patients.
 - Consider overdose AND heat illness in patients who are un-responsive or have altered mental status.
 - Take a core body temperature of all patients presenting with suspected overdose.
 - Initiate cooling measures in addition to overdose treatment in patients with a high temperature.
 - Link: [Heat-related Illnesses](#)
- Know your Community's Resources
 - Keep a list of community spaces for people who use drugs like user health hubs and air-conditioned syringe centers for patients who need to get out of the heat.
 - Identify drop-in cooling centers where patients are less likely to face stigma for substance use, like shelters without sobriety requirements.
 - Help patients plan for heat emergencies by identifying opioid treatment alternatives when power outages close clinics.
 - Share mobile or mail delivery harm reduction resources for when high temperatures make it hard to travel.

Summary

- Heat increases the risk of overdose but doctors can help save lives.
- Every patient visit is an opportunity to prevent heat-driven deaths