

10 Summer Senior Care Tips for Family Caregivers

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Summertime brings long lazy days of visiting family and friends. But at the same time, this time of year also brings plenty of heat, humidity, and sun. Summer weather conditions require some adjustments as well as careful planning and preparation in order for you and your elderly loved ones to enjoy the season safely.

“The most important thing is to ask your loved one how they are feeling,” advises Stephanie Morgan, PhD, RN, director of Practice Innovation at the School of Nursing at The University of Texas Austin.

When temperatures rise, check on older relatives and neighbors once or twice a day and pay attention to any new symptoms they report. Being hot but unable to sweat is a sign that they need immediate help cooling down, says Morgan. Move them to a cool space indoors or in the shade, give them water, and put cool clothes on their skin.

Other new symptoms such as nausea, dizziness, confusion, rapid breathing, and headache all should prompt you to give them water and get them into a cooler space. “Heat exhaustion and heat stroke are the dangers to watch out for,” she explains.

Morgan advocates preventing heat-related problems with careful preparation.

We've gathered the following expert tips to help you do just that.

1. Get the right amount of water.

Every expert we talked to stressed the importance of keeping your loved one hydrated. That means, making sure they are drinking enough fluids throughout the day.

“Encourage them to drink some water every hour or two,” advises Brooklyn-based dermatologist Eliot Y Gatan, MD, a spokesperson for the American Academy of Dermatology. Remember that soup, popsicles, juice, tea, coffee, and soda all count towards your loved one's total fluid intake – but also that water is the best drink on hot days.

However, for older adults, healthy hydration isn't as simple as providing them with a bottle full of fresh cool water to sip on. Before you help them hydrate, make sure you know: Does your loved one have a fluid restriction? Some older adults have to limit their daily fluid intake. Make sure you talk to your loved one's medical team if there is a fluid restriction to find out how to handle hydration in the summer without giving them too much water.

Why does your loved one choose not to drink? Some older adults avoid drinking before going on a trip or before bed, because they do not want to have to find a toilet quickly. Make sure you talk to your loved one about why they might be worried about drinking too much. See if you can ease their worries by mapping out bathroom locations or finding other practical solutions.

Even with the best intentions, an older adult might forget to drink enough, says caregiving blogger and speaker Dale Carter. “Even the elderly in good health tend to underestimate how much water they need,” she says. Not getting enough water can raise the risk of falling and becoming confused, irritable or disoriented, so it's essential to get the balance right. Daily weigh-ins can be helpful.

If your loved one's weight goes up or down by two to three pounds over night, contact their medical team, advises Tracie Harrison, RN, associate professor and director of the UT Austin School of Nursing Long-Term Care Center. Fluid retention problems can be one cause for rapid weight change.

2. Pay attention to heat and allergy warnings.

You can check for any heat advisories or allergy warnings through your local weather report or at www.weather.gov. “If the weather forecast predicts hot and steamy weather for a few days in a row, plan a stay-cation to the local shopping mall, movie theater, museum or library to stay cool while keeping yourself active and alert,” advises David Reid, owner of Homewatch CareGivers of Northwest Tampa.

Encourage older adults to go outside in the cooler parts of the day, such as early

morning or evening, and stay indoors between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Limit time outside to about 15 minutes and then head back inside to cool off, recommends Morgan.

For exercise in the summer, forgo outdoor walking paths, parks and trails for cooler places, such as a pool or indoor mall. If your loved one relies on a gym for exercise, make sure it has adequate air conditioning.

3. Moisturize

Despite the humidity, a light, fragrance-free moisturizer after bathing is still important. “When the skin becomes dry you can get micro-cuts,” says Gatan. Summer can actually be quite drying, especially if your loved one is in and out of pool or ocean water, or in and out of air-conditioned environments.

4. Beware of hot surfaces

Car upholstery, outside benches and chairs, car doors, and the cement of a patio or pool area can all get hot enough to harm delicate skin. Check surfaces before your loved one touches them. Gatan recommends placing something between your loved one and a hot surface, such as a towel. Make sure your loved one wears shoes with solid soles when going outside. Touch surfaces lightly with your elbow to find out whether they are hot.

5. Avoid sitting in one spot for long periods.

Pressure sores occur when people stay in one spot for a while. Prolonged sitting can also lead to less hip mobility, a major cause of falls among the elderly.

“Move as much as possible,” advises Gatan, who says using a small pillow or donut ring to shift position while sitting might help.

6. Keep indoor air cool.

Try these strategies to make sure your love one’s living space is as cool as possible:

- Block the sun. “Try the pull down shades under draperies,” recommends Molly Carpenter, a caregiver advocate with Home Instead Senior Care.
- Use the oven early, or not at all. “Get baking done early in the morning,” advises Carpenter. During the day, focus on foods such as sandwiches and salads that won’t heat up the house.
- Move seating and beds away from sunny spots.
- “This is a good time to get the AC serviced or make sure there are working fans at home,” says Carpenter.
- Carpenter also recommends staying cool indoors by wearing loose, light clothing. Layer if needed.

7. Make sure food is prepared and stored safely.

Food can spoil more quickly when it’s hot and humid. Carpenter recommends storing more items in the refrigerator than you ordinarily might. Items like

potatoes, onions, and bananas should be stored in cool spaces, not on the counter top. “Also remember that your pantry needs to stay cool,” she adds. This is another reason to keep your kitchen cool in daytime.

8. Make sure medication is stored correctly.

Like food, medication also needs cool storage. Katherine Vogel Anderson, a pharmacist and clinical assistant professor at the University of Florida Colleges of Pharmacy and Medicine, recommends storing medication at room temperature, which tops out at about 77 degrees F.

“Storing medications in hot temperatures can decrease drug stability and effectiveness,” she points out. Certain medications, such as vials of insulin, need to be stored in the refrigerator. Check labeling on bottles to find out about storage and never store medication in direct sunlight, says Vogel.

9. Wear sun hats, long sleeves, and sunscreen.

You’ll want to protect against sunburns, but your loved one also might need coverage because of medications they are taking. Vogel notes that some antibiotics, pain medications, diabetes medications, and heart medications interact badly with sun exposure.

10. Protect against bugs and pests.

“Bugs and rodents might come into a home looking for water in the summer,” says Harrison. Pests can be a hassle both indoors and outdoors. Make sure you respond quickly to any signs of pests inside the house, and use bug repellent while outside.