

2023 Heat Season Preparedness For Community Organizations

Who is VCH Seasonal Readiness?

Email notifications are sent jointly from VCH Public Health (Priority Populations, Healthy Environments and Climate Change programs). The content and health guidance is intended for organizations supporting their community during extreme weather events. Email us to sign up: seasonalreadiness@vch.ca

What does VCH Seasonal Readiness email me?

- Seasonal readiness webinars
- Pre-season messaging and updates
- Environment Canada Special Weather Statements for the first heat event of the summer
- Environment Canada Heat Warnings
- Extreme Heat Emergency notifications from the province of BC
- Coming soon: Health guidance and notifications for other seasonal hazards, e.g. Extreme Cold Events

What is in this guide?

- 2023 Updates (page 2)
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2023 Heat Season Updates

- Metro Vancouver, including Vancouver, Richmond, North Vancouver and West Vancouver, are now unlinked from Sea to Sky for heat alerts, which will be issued independently for each region.
- After the first three heat events of the summer in a given forecast region, the BC HEAT Committee **may** recommend extending the minimum number of days required for Heat Warning criteria in the region. See [BC HARS 2023](#) for more information.
- **New Heat Resources:**
 - [VCH Creating Cooling Spaces During Hot Weather: Guidance for Community Organizations](#)
 - [VCH Example Heat Check-In Script](#) (see Extreme Heat Resources, Community Orgs & Events tab)
 - [BCCDC factsheet on Wildfire Smoke during Heat Events](#)
 - MOSAIC is running heat wellness checks for seniors who do not speak English or French. Seniors can opt-in or family, friends or organizations can refer them. See [registration page](#) for details.
- **Key messages from 2022:**
 - Indoor temperatures are the greatest risk during heat events. The risk for heat-related illness may increase at indoor temperatures over 26°C (78 °F) and may significantly increase at indoor temperatures over 31 °C (88 °F), especially for people at higher risk to heat. During heat events it is crucial to cool indoor living spaces, or spend time in other cool spaces.
 - Fans do not directly cool the air and should not be used as the primary source of cooling for people at risk in hot indoor environments. See the [VCH/ FHA Fan FAQ](#) for more information.

Weather Notifications

Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) is the official Canadian weather service used by health authorities, government and emergency management professionals.

- ECCC provides **early warning email notifications** for organizations involved in emergency response. Email MeteoPac@ec.gc.ca to sign up.
- Download the [WeatherCAN](#) app to get ECCC public weather alerts (including air quality).

Types of Heat Events and Notifications

1. Heat Warning (Level 1 Alert)

Very hot temperatures, with a moderate public health risk (5% increase in mortality). BC is divided into five Heat Warning regions, each with its own Heat Warning criteria. Most of Vancouver Coastal Health falls under the Southwestern BC Region, which includes: North Shore, City of Vancouver, Richmond, Howe Sound, Whistler, Sunshine Coast and Vancouver Island (except northern sections). 1-3 heat warnings are expected per summer.

Heat warning criteria for southwestern BC: two or more consecutive days of daytime maximum temperatures expected to reach 29°C or warmer and nighttime minimum temperatures expected to fall to 16°C or warmer.

2. Extreme Heat Emergency (Level 2 Alert)

Dangerously hot temperatures, with a very high public health risk (20% or more increase in mortality). Extreme Heat Emergencies may be issued when Heat Warning criteria has been met and the forecast indicates daily highs will substantively increase day-over-day for three or more consecutive days. The [BC HEAT committee](#) decides when an Extreme Heat Emergency will be issued. 1-2 Extreme Heat Emergencies are expected per decade.

3. Yellow Weather Notifications

ECCC early warning notification for **possible** high impact weather in British Columbia, as defined in consultation with emergency management officials. VCH Seasonal Readiness will only contact you regarding yellow weather notifications for Extreme Heat Emergencies (not Heat Warnings).

4. Special Weather Statement

For the first event of the year, ECCC may diverge from the standard Heat Warning process and issue a public-facing special weather statement, possibly evolving into a Heat Warning for the B.C. region(s) impacted. This special weather statement is intended to provide partners with the most preparation lead-time, and may include some strategic pre-event messaging.

5. Prolonged Heat Events

People's bodies in heat are under stress and working hard to cool down, similar to during physical exercise like a marathon. It may be possible to run one marathon but most of us would struggle to run a marathon every day. Longer heat events, with ongoing exposure and a need to cool down day after day, can cause physical strain and health harms in people at higher risk. We recommend checking on people at risk even after a heat event has ended because they could still be recovering and experiencing negative health impacts.

People at Higher Risk for Heat

People respond differently to heat, and some people are at higher risk of experiencing health effects. Individuals with multiple risk factors are at higher risk and are more likely to require frequent wellness checks.

Groups at higher risk for heat-related illness:

- seniors aged 65 years or older
- people who live alone
- people with pre-existing health conditions and/ or disabilities (e.g. diabetes, heart disease, respiratory disease, schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, limited mobility and other disabilities)
- people using substances, including alcohol

Other groups at risk for heat-related illness:

- people who are experiencing homelessness or marginal housing
- people who are pregnant
- infants and young children

Health Effects of Heat

Extreme heat events, also known as "heat waves," can cause a number of heat-related illnesses, and can lead to an increase in deaths. Heat-related illness is an umbrella term for conditions caused by heat, such as heat rash, sunburn, heat cramps, heat exhaustion, and, the most severe, heat stroke.

Symptoms of heat exhaustion include:

- Heavy sweating
- Dizziness
- Nausea or vomiting
- Rapid breathing & heartbeat
- Headache
- Difficulty concentrating
- Muscle cramps
- Extreme thirst
- New skin rash
- Dark urine & decreased urination

Actions for possible heat exhaustion: Move to a cool space, drink water, and apply cool water to large areas of the skin (cool bath, shower or wet their clothes). Take these steps right away because heat exhaustion can quickly develop into heat stroke, which is a medical emergency.

Symptoms of heat stroke include:

- High body temperature (>38°C/100°F)
- Fainting or drowsiness
- Confusion
- Lack of coordination
- Very hot and red skin

Actions for possible heat stroke: **Heat stroke is a medical emergency.** Seek medical attention immediately at an emergency room or urgent care centre. Call 911 if necessary. While waiting for help, cool the person right away by moving them to a cool space if possible, and apply cool water to large areas of the skin (cool bath, shower, or wet their clothes).

Supportive Community Level Actions

The BC Heat Alert Response System (BC HARS) outlines recommended actions for health, emergency management, governments and non-governmental organizations. This includes actions for pre-season and each level of heat warning. [BC HARS recommendations for NGOs](#) are on pages 35-37.

Example actions NGOs can take during a heat event:

- Encourage community members to [make a heat plan](#), build a [cool kit](#) and check in with their heat buddy.
- Share the location of cooling centres, air conditioned spaces, outdoor cool spaces (e.g. parks or lakes) and drinking water with the public. Local governments often share this on their social media or website.
- Share ways to cool people and spaces. [VCH Heat Webpage](#) has posters and translated materials. Learn [how best to use fans](#) during heat events.
- Share harm reduction tips for heat events. See the [BCCDC Towards the Heart Resources](#).
- Checking on people may be life-saving. Encourage community members to check on each other and consider running heat wellness checks. Learn how to run organizational heat checks with the [VCH Heat Check-In Support Framework](#) or contact the [VCH HECC team](#) for free heat check-in training.
 - Open a public cool space in your building. See the [VCH Creating Cooling Spaces During Hot Weather: Guidance for Community Organizations](#) for tips.

Translated Resources for the Public

- [VCH Extreme Heat Poster](#) (English, Arabic, Chinese-Simplified, Chinese-Traditional, Hindi, Korean, Farsi, Punjabi, Spanish, Urdu, Vietnamese and Gujarati)
- [PreparedBC Heat Information and Extreme Heat Preparedness Guide](#) (English, French, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, Punjabi)
- [NCCEH Health Checks During Extreme Heat Events](#) (English, French, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, Punjabi)
- [VCH/ City of Vancouver Build Your Own Cool Kit- bottom of page](#) (English, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, Punjabi)
- [BCCDC Wildfire Smoke Guidance](#) (ASL, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, Arabic, French, Punjabi, Farsi, Korean, Spanish, Vietnamese)