



counsel + care   
for older people, their families and carers

guide

Information from Counsel and Care: 26

# Health difficulties caused by hot and cold weather

Extreme weather can affect older people more severely than other groups and often existing health difficulties can be adversely affected by weather conditions.

This guide covers how to cope in very cold and very hot weather and to make sure that you keep yourself safe and well. It also covers energy saving tips, which can help to reduce your utility bills, as well as detailing Government schemes available to help with energy costs.

Counsel and Care is the national charity working with older people, their families and carers to get the best care and support. If you have found our service helpful, please consider making a donation or leaving a legacy in your Will. You can arrange either by telephoning 020 7241 8555 or using the secure service on our website [www.counselandcare.org.uk](http://www.counselandcare.org.uk).



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Your donations, legacies and payroll giving enable Counsel and Care to get the best care and support for older people, their families and carers

Counsel and Care is a national charity; however the creation of the Scottish Parliament, and the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies means there are differences in the ways each region cares for and supports older people. The information in this guide applies essentially to England although there may be similarities with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

We also produce five separate guides for both Scotland and Wales covering the community care assessment of need process; paying care home fees and making a formal complaint which are the key areas where the policy and legislation differ significantly to England. All of the guides we publish can be downloaded from [www.counselandcare.org.uk/helping-you/guides](http://www.counselandcare.org.uk/helping-you/guides) or posted to you by calling our guide orderline on 020 7241 8522.

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# 1 Coping with hot weather

Older people can be especially vulnerable to suffering adverse effects on their health during hot weather, and can experience heatstroke, heat exhaustion and dehydration. The symptoms of heat exhaustion can include headaches, nausea and vomiting, muscle weakness or cramps, pale skin, and a high temperature. The symptoms of dehydration include thirst, headaches and a reduced ability to think clearly, and can lead to urine infections and confusion.

There are things you can do to help yourself keep cool and reduce dehydration in very hot weather:

- Avoid going out in the hottest part of the day, from 11am–3pm
- If you need to leave the house, make sure you wear a sun hat to protect your face and head. Apply a good sun cream to any exposed parts of your body or keep them lightly covered to avoid sunburn. Make sure you take some water with you.
- Keep your curtains closed to stop sun shining directly into your house
- Cool down with a cool shower or bath
- Aim to drink two litres of water a day, and avoid caffeinated drinks like tea and coffee
- Consider wearing sunglasses to reduce headaches, sun glare and poor vision

- If possible, purchase a good quality electric fan and make sure this is positioned in a safe place with no trailing wires
- Have security locks fitted to windows so that you can leave them open safely and always close and lock them before leaving home.

If you are in any doubt about any health problems you have, or you feel very unwell, always contact your GP. You can also contact NHS Direct (tel.: 0845 4647; [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)) who can take the details of your symptoms and advise on what to do. It is also a good idea to inform friends, family or a neighbour if you are feeling unwell.

## **2 The problems associated with cold weather**

It is known that cold weather can make older people more susceptible to colds and flu; increases the risk of heart attack, stroke or breathing problems; and can lead to hypothermia (a drop in body temperature that can be fatal). It is important, therefore, that you make plans for any cold weather, so that you reduce any risks to your health.

In recent months, domestic energy bills have increased by substantial amounts. This can cause problems for people on a fixed income or a pension, but with cautious use of energy, costs can be more controlled.

### **2.1 How warm should your home be?**

It is important that you maintain a stable comfortable temperature in your home over a 24-hour period during the winter months. This may be cheaper than turning the heating up in the daytime and turning it off at night.

The World Health Organisation recommends that your living room should be heated to 21°C (70°F) and the other rooms in your house should be 18°C (64°F). You may wish to consider buying a wall thermometer so that you can keep a regular check on the temperature.

### 3 Practical preparation for cold weather

There are some practical steps you can take before the cold weather starts which will make it easier to cope with a cold snap. You could consider the following:

- Have a look at the Government's "Keep Warm, Keep Well" website [www.keepwarmkeepwell.direct.gov.uk](http://www.keepwarmkeepwell.direct.gov.uk) There are lots of useful tips and booklets to download, and links to other sites that can help you.
- Contact the new Energy Savings Trust (tel.: 0800 512 012; [www.energysavingtrust.org.uk](http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk)) to enquire about having your home properly insulated, to apply for an insulation grant and for advice about the most appropriate forms of heating for your home. Every household should qualify for at least 50% off loft and cavity wall insulation and a range of other energy saving devices such as low energy lightbulbs, real time displays and energy saverplugs. If you are over 70 or on a low income, you should qualify for these free of charge. By installing cavity wall and and loft insulation, you could save around £270 on your energy bills.
- Make sure your heating system and any fires are working correctly by having them serviced, and make sure you know how to operate them. You can contact your local Home Improvement Agency through Foundations (tel.: 08458 645 210; [www.foundations.uk.com](http://www.foundations.uk.com)) for details of a reliable person to do this.

- If you are concerned about heating bills, learn how to turn off the radiators in the rooms you don't often use and keep the doors to these rooms closed. Or, you might wish to consider having individual radiator thermostats fitted. This means you only have to heat the main rooms you use in your house.
- Think about the other energy saving measures detailed in section 5 of this guide. These could help you reduce your bills whilst still keeping your home warm.
- You will be called by your GP to have a free flu jab if you are over 65, or you have serious heart disease, serious renal disease, serious respiratory disease or diabetes.
- Drinking hot drinks and eating hot meals will help keep your body temperature up.
- Try not to leave the house in the very coldest of weather. If you do need to go out, make sure that you are wearing layers of warm clothing, and that you have shoes with a good grip on them. Consider taking a walking stick to help you if it is slippery.
- Moving about is a good way of keeping warm, so you could spread out your chores throughout the day so that you are not sitting for too long. This can cause your body temperature to drop.
- Ensure that you have plenty of food stored in the house, in case you are unable to leave the house for any reason.
- You could contact friends or relatives who you know can get out safely asking them to buy fresh supplies for you if you cannot leave the house.

- Make sure you have the details of your GP to hand, should you need to contact them to make a home visit.
- If you do feel that you are becoming unwell, ring your GP and ask them to make a home visit to see you. Make sure you contact any local friends or relatives who can help you.

## 4 Your gas and electricity suppliers

There are actions you can take to ensure that you are satisfied with the service you receive from your gas and electricity supplier.

### 4.1 The Priority Service Register

It is important that all consumers who are over 60, or live with a disability, or have a visual or hearing impairment, register with their gas and electricity supplier(s) under the Priority Services Register scheme.

This is a scheme that lists those people who could be in need of special care and attention if the gas or electricity supply is cut off. (Note that some suppliers have a different name for the scheme.) If you do register, you will be entitled to:

- A password so that anyone visiting your home or calling you from your energy supplier can be identified.
- A bill nominee scheme, enabling someone else, such as a relative or friend to read or check your bills for you if needed.
- A free annual safety check for all your gas appliances.
- If required, energy bills supplied in large print, audiotape or Braille format.
- Meter readings every 3 months, if you are unable to do this yourself.

- Advance notice and special care and attention when your gas or electricity supply is to be disrupted for any appreciable period of time so that alternative arrangements can be made.

To apply for the scheme, either contact your energy supplier(s) directly (see the phone number on your bill) or call the Home Heat Helpline (tel.: 0800 33 66 99; [www.homeheathelpline.org.uk](http://www.homeheathelpline.org.uk)) and they will arrange it for you. See section 4.4 for more details.

## 4.2 Receiving your bills

- Check your bill when it arrives. Take a note of the present reading on the bill and check this against the reading on your meter. If the readings are different, contact your supplier as soon as possible with the actual reading. Their phone number is on your bill.
- Always take meter readings when you move in or out of a property. Give these to your supplier and keep a written copy for yourself.
- You can set up a payment plan with your supplier so that you pay a fixed amount per month, based on your average usage. Ask your supplier to check this for you every six months.
- If you have never changed your energy supplier you could save yourself up to £100 per year by doing so. You can check if there is a cheaper supplier by contacting Consumer Direct for a price comparison factsheet (tel.:08454 04 05 06; [www.consumerdirect.gov.uk](http://www.consumerdirect.gov.uk)). If you have internet access, you can log on to the Consumer Focus website ([www.consumerfocus.org.uk](http://www.consumerfocus.org.uk)) to compare prices across the country. Organisations such as uSwitch (tel.: 0800 404 7908) or Which? can also

compare gas and electricity prices in your area. ([www.which.co.uk](http://www.which.co.uk)) Please note that some content on the Which? website is free, and some is for their members only. There is a charge to be a member.)

- All energy suppliers now offer lower 'social tariffs' to older people and those on low incomes. Freezes have been announced by some companies on their tariffs. The discounts can be worth £200-250 a year. For more information, call the Home Heat Helpline (tel.: 0800 33 66 99; [www.homeheathelpline.org.uk](http://www.homeheathelpline.org.uk)) and they can liaise with your supplier on your behalf. See section 4.4 for more details.
- Do contact your supplier if you don't understand how your bill is calculated – they are there to help you.
- Do contact your supplier if you are faced with a bill you cannot pay. Some suppliers have trust funds set up to assist people who are in financial difficulty. Alternatively, call the Home Heat Helpline (see above for details).
- Keep a note of all your records just in case you may need them.
- If you have a pre-payment meter for gas or electricity, be aware your charges are likely to be higher than for an ordinary credit meter.

### **4.3 What to be careful about when receiving your bills**

- Don't assume estimated bills are accurate.
- Don't allow estimated bills to continue – you are responsible for **all** the energy you use and suppliers will eventually present you with an accurate bill, which could amount to hundreds of pounds.

Avoid that pitfall by checking your bill against your meter, and providing your supplier with the correct reading as soon as possible.

- Don't assume supplier's monthly payment predictions are always right – to ensure your payments are covering the energy you use, ask your supplier every six months to assess your payment plan.
- Don't be afraid to complain or question your supplier about any issues relating to your account.

#### **4.4 The Home Heat Helpline**

The Home Heat Helpline is a free phone number offering advice on subjects including energy advice, cheaper payment schemes, grants for insulating your home, and how to register for extra services and government benefits. Trained advisors can also speak to your supplier on your behalf. They can be contacted on 0800 33 66 99; [www.homeheathelpline.org.uk](http://www.homeheathelpline.org.uk) .

## 5 Reducing your energy bills

Careful use of energy can mean that you reduce your energy usage and, therefore, the amount of money you spend. This will also help reduce CO2 emissions and global warming. You should consider taking the following steps to reduce your usage:

- **Switch off your television.** Did you know that when your television is left on standby you are not turning off the electricity? Not turning it off using the on/off switch costs you approximately £26 per year for each television that is left on.
- **Turn off your stereo.** Again, if this is left on standby it is still using electricity. By not switching it off you are adding up to £45 a year onto your bill.
- **Switch off your video/DVD/digital box.** By leaving these on standby you are spending up to an extra £20 per year. The clocks on most modern appliances will reset automatically when they are turned back on – just give them a few minutes to do so.
- **Turn off your computer.** Get into the habit of switching your computer off when not in use, otherwise you may be paying costs up to £116 a year more than you have to.
- **Switch off your printer.** By leaving your printer on when not in use you could face unnecessary costs of up to £62 per year.
- **Replace your regular light bulbs with energy saving ones.** Each energy light bulb will save you at least £60 over its lifetime, and as

they last 10 times as long as standard bulbs, you won't have to change them as frequently.

- **Close your curtains at night.** This will knock approximately £15 per year off your bills.
- **Fit draught excluders.** This saves about £10 per year.
- **Defrost your freezer regularly.** It keeps it running efficiently which saves pounds. Make sure it is A-rated and save yourself approximately £25 a year.
- **Put a full load in the washing machine.** If your machine doesn't have a half-load setting, then make sure you are putting in full loads. Three full loads instead of six half loads per week could put approximately £47 per year back into your pocket.
- **Turn your thermostat down.** Turning your heating down by 1°C knocks 10% off your heating bill, a saving of around £40 per year.
- **Replace that old boiler.** Replacing a boiler which is over 15 years old with a new energy efficiency condensing boiler, and installing heating controls, could cut your bills by an amazing 40%. For example, a three-bedroom house using gas central heating could save approximately £160 per year.
- **Buy energy efficient appliances.** If it's time to replace some of the appliances and products (for example, a fridge, freezer, washing machine, dishwasher, or tumble dryer, etc.) in your home, make sure energy efficiency is high on your shopping list. Look for the Energy Efficiency Recommended logo. If everyone in the UK upgraded their old fridge to an A-rated, energy efficient product,

energy wastage would be cut by over two-thirds. If you are on a low income, see section 4, which details the grants available to assist you.

- **Insulate your loft and cavity walls.** This could cut up to 25% off your heating costs – a saving of up to £100 per year based on a three-bedroom house. Consider installing double-glazing and wall cavity insulation, which can significantly reduce your bills. (See section 3 for more details of the new government-funded scheme offering reduced or free insulation.)
- **Fit a jacket to your hot-water tank.** This could save you approximately £15 a year.

How many of those changes could you make? By being more energy efficient you will put the pounds back into your pocket and help protect the environment. For more information on saving energy at home and free energy saving light bulbs, contact the Energy Saving Trust on 0800 512 012; [www.energysavingtrust.org.uk](http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk). Which? also has information comparing boilers, portable heaters, light bulbs (and a range of other heating and lighting measures) available at [www.which.co.uk](http://www.which.co.uk) Please note that some content on the Which? website is free, and some is for their members only. There is a charge to be a member.

## 6 Financial assistance to help with heating costs

### 6.1 Warm Front Grants

Warm Front is a government-funded scheme set up to provide energy advice and grants to home owners and private tenants on a low income. The Warm Front Grant provides a package of energy efficiency and heating measures up to the value of £3, 500 (except where oil central heating is installed or repaired where a maximum grant of £6, 000 is available). An organisation known as the Eaga Partnership Ltd runs the scheme in most areas of England. For further information and advice, or to apply for a Warm Front Grant, call Eaga on 0800 316 2805, or log on its website at: [www.warmfront.co.uk](http://www.warmfront.co.uk).

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have different schemes to England's Warm Front scheme; some are run by Eaga from their regional offices.

In **Scotland**, it is called the Energy Assistance Package, and is administered by the Energy Savings Trust, on behalf of the Scottish Government. (It replaces the Central Heating Programme and Warm Deal.) To find out what the package can offer you, and to see if you are eligible, contact the Energy Saving Trust (tel.: 0800 512 012 or [www.energyassistancepackage.com](http://www.energyassistancepackage.com)).

You may find Age Concern and Help the Aged Scotland's factsheets "1s – Help with Heating" and "46s – Paying for care and support at home" useful; see

[www.ageconcernandhelptheagedscotland.org.uk/helping\\_you/factsheets](http://www.ageconcernandhelptheagedscotland.org.uk/helping_you/factsheets)

for further information, or contact The Scottish Helpline for Older People, run by Age Concern and Help the Aged Scotland on 0845 125 9732.

In **Wales**, it is the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (tel.: 0800 316 2815 or [www.heeswales.co.uk](http://www.heeswales.co.uk))

In **Northern Ireland**, it is the Warm Homes Scheme (tel.: 0800 988 0559 or [www.warm-homes.com](http://www.warm-homes.com))

For all Eaga Partnership Schemes, you can also apply online at:

[www.eaga.com](http://www.eaga.com).

## **6.2 Warm Front £300 Rebate Scheme**

For those who are not eligible for a Warm Front Grant but who are 60 or over and do not have a central heating system or have a system that does not work, there is a Warm Front £300 Rebate Scheme available to help with the cost of installing central heating. For more information, and to apply, you will need to contact Eaga on 0800 316 2805.

## 6.2 Winter Fuel Payments

Winter Fuel Payments are made annually by the Government to anyone over 60 to help with the additional costs of keeping warm over the winter months. You do not have to be on a low income, but you have to be 60 years old during the qualifying week of 15-21 September 2009. For 2009-10, you will receive £250 for your household if you are over 60 and £400 for your household if you are over 80. If you are receiving another state benefit you should receive this Payment automatically. The Winter Fuel Payment helpline can help with any questions (tel.: 0845 915 15 15; [http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Pensionsandretirementplanning/Benefits/BenefitsInRetirement/DG\\_10018657](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Pensionsandretirementplanning/Benefits/BenefitsInRetirement/DG_10018657)).

## 6.3 Cold Weather Payments

You can receive a tax-free Cold Weather Payment of £25 per qualifying week if the weather has fallen to, or is predicted to fall to below, 0°C for seven consecutive days. To be eligible to receive this you must be receiving Pension Credit or on a low income. You should receive your payment automatically from the Department of Work and Pensions.

If you have any questions about the Cold Weather Payments, you should contact your local Jobcentre Plus office. Contact details of your local office can be found in your local telephone directory, or by looking on the Jobcentre Plus website: [www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk](http://www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk).

For more information about Warm Front Grants, Winter Fuel Payments, Cold Weather Payments and other sources of funding available to help

people on a low income, please see guide **4: Grants and loans from the state for people on a low income (the Social Fund)**.

Our advice workers can advise on a wide range of issues affecting older people, their relatives and carers. Counsel and Care produce a range of guides which can be downloaded from our website [www.counselandcare.org.uk](http://www.counselandcare.org.uk), or requested by calling our guide orderline on 020 7241 8522.

This guide is not a full explanation of the law and is aimed at people over 60.

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