



counsel + care   
for older people, their families and carers

guide

## Guide 26:

# How to cope during hot weather and cold weather

Extreme weather can affect older people more severely than other groups of people so it is a good idea to plan ahead if extreme weather is forecast. This guide covers practical tips on how to cope in very cold and very hot weather. It also covers ways in which you can reduce your energy bills, such as insulating your home, and lists what government grants and benefits may be available to help with energy costs.

**The Counsel and Care advice service works with older people, their families and carers to get the best care and support. All the guides and factsheets we produce are available from our website: [www.counselandcare.org.uk](http://www.counselandcare.org.uk) or paper versions can be ordered by calling 020 7241 8522. You can call our advice line on 0845 300 7585 to arrange an appointment to speak to one of our experienced advisors.**



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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

The Counsel and Care service is now part of Independent Age, a unique and growing charity providing information, advice and support for thousands of older people across the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Visit [www.independentage.org](http://www.independentage.org) for more information about Independent Age.

There are differences in the ways each country cares for and supports older people. The information in this guide applies essentially to England, although there may be similarities with countries in the rest of the UK.

We also produce five separate guides for both Scotland and Wales covering the needs assessment process; paying care home fees and making a formal complaint, which are the key areas where the policy and legislation differs significantly from England.

All of the guides we publish may be downloaded from [www.counselandcare.org.uk/advice-and-information](http://www.counselandcare.org.uk/advice-and-information)

or posted to you if you call our guide order line on [020 7241 8522](tel:02072418522).

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# 1 Coping with hot weather

Older people can suffer adverse effects on their health during hot weather. Older people can be more vulnerable to illnesses such as heatstroke, heat exhaustion and dehydration. During periods of hot weather it is important to take preventative measures and be aware of the symptoms of heat-related illness.

The symptoms of heat stroke can include: nausea, feeling faint and heavy sweating. Heat stroke can lead to heat exhaustion.

The symptoms of heat exhaustion can include: muscle cramps, nausea, mental confusion, hyperventilation and loss of consciousness.

The symptoms of dehydration can include: dizziness, thirst, headaches and tiredness. Ongoing dehydration can lead to urine infections, kidney stones and damage to your liver.

To help keep yourself cool during hot weather you should consider the following:

- Avoid going out during the hottest part of the day (11am–3pm).
- If you are going outside, make sure you cover up by wearing loose, light-weight clothing and a sun hat to protect against sunburn.
- Apply a generous amount of sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15, preferably water resistant, to any exposed parts of your body before going out.
- If you are leaving the house take a bottle of water with you.
- Keep your curtains and blinds closed to stop the sun shining directly into your house.

- Cool down with a cool shower or bath.
- Aim to drink at least two litres of water a day, and avoid caffeinated drinks like tea and coffee.
- Try to eat more cold foods such as salads and fruits.
- Wear sunglasses during sunny weather to reduce sun glare and the chance of headaches.
- If possible purchase a good quality electric fan. Make sure this is positioned in a safe place with no trailing wires.
- Avoid strenuous activity.
- Have security locks fitted to windows so that you can leave windows open safely.

If you are in any doubt about any health problems you have, or you feel 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 next – whether to call 999 immediately, book an appointment with your GP or visit a pharmacist in your own time. It is also a good idea to inform friends, family or a neighbour if you are feeling unwell.

## 2 Coping with cold weather

Cold weather can make older people more susceptible to health problems. Cold weather increases the risk of illnesses such as colds, coughs, flu, heart attacks, strokes, breathing problems and hypothermia. It is important, therefore, to make plans for any cold weather spells to reduce any risks to your health.

It is important that you maintain a stable, comfortable temperature in your home over a 24-hour period during the winter months. The World Health Organisation recommends that your living room should be heated to 21°C (70°F) and the other rooms in your home 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.

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

- Improve the energy efficiency of your home (see section 4).  
Improving the energy efficiency will mean it is easier to heat up and maintain a warm temperature in your home.
- Consider installing a grab rail if you have steps leading to your front door and you are worried about falling during icy weather. You can arrange this by contacting your local council social services team. Their contact details will be in the local telephone directory or on the council's website.
- Get your heating system serviced regularly (if you do not already have yearly services provided by the installer) and check it is working before the cold weather starts. To find a registered gas engineer in your local area contact Gas Safe Register

(tel.: 0800 408 5500; [www.gassaferegister.co.uk](http://www.gassaferegister.co.uk)) the official registration body for gas engineers.

- If you are concerned about heating bills, turn off or turn down radiators in the rooms you do not use often and keep the doors to these rooms closed. This means you only have to heat the main rooms you use in your house.
- If you are over 65 or have a serious medical condition, the Department of Health recommends you get a flu vaccination annually. Most GPs offer special vaccination sessions every autumn. The vaccination is free and even if you are nervous about injections it is worth getting as flu can be dangerous for older people.
- Drink hot drinks and eat hot meals to help keep your body temperature up.
- Try not to leave the house during the coldest weather. If you need to go out, make sure that you are wearing layers of warm clothing and choose warm shoes with 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. You could try exercising (even chair based exercises), or spreading your chores out throughout the day, so that you are not sitting in one place for too long.
- Ensure that you have plenty of non-perishable food stored at home in case you are unable to leave the house for any reason.
- Telephone a relative or friend if you are not able to get out of your house so that they are aware of your situation. They may be able to bring, or arrange for you to be brought, essential items.
- Use a hot water bottle or electric blanket to warm up your bed at night. Make sure your electric blanket is tested at least every three years. Your local fire service or trading standards may provide a

testing service. Consumer Direct (tel.: 08454 04 05 06) will be able to provide you with contact details of your local trading standards office.

- Keep a supply of over-the-counter medicines for common ailments such as colds, coughs and sore throats, at home. Order repeat prescriptions in plenty of time, especially if bad weather is forecast. Some pharmacists are able to deliver prescriptions to your home.
- If you feel that you are becoming unwell call NHS Direct (tel.: 0845 46 47) for advice or call your GP and ask them to make a home visit.

For further information and tips about keeping well during cold weather have a look at the Government's Keep Warm, Keep Well website:

[www.nhs.uk/Livewell/winterhealth/Pages/KeepWarmKeepWell.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/winterhealth/Pages/KeepWarmKeepWell.aspx)

## 3 Your gas and electricity suppliers

There are actions you can take to ensure that you are receiving a satisfactory service and competitive prices from your gas and electricity supplier.

### 3.1 The Priority Services Register

If you are of pensionable age, have a disability or are chronically sick, you can apply to be included in your energy supplier's Priority Services Register. The Priority Services Register lists people who could be in need of special care and attention if their gas or electricity supply was cut off. If you register, you will be entitled to:

- A password so that if someone from your energy supplier is visiting you at home or telephoning you, they can easily be identified.
- A bill nominee scheme, enabling someone else, such as a relative or friend, to receive or check your energy bills for you if needed.
- A free annual safety check for all your gas appliances.
- Your energy bills can be supplied in large print, audiotape or Braille format if required.
- Meter readings every 3 months if you are unable to do this yourself.
- Advance notice and special care and attention if your gas or electricity supply is to be disrupted so that alternative arrangements can be made.

To apply for the scheme 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)) who can arrange it for you (see section 3.3).

### 3.2 Receiving your bills

- Check your bill when it arrives. Make a note of the meter reading on your 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 will be 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 each month based on your average usage. Ask your supplier to check this for you every six months.
- Consider changing your energy supplier. You can check if there is a cheaper supplier by contacting the following price comparison companies which have been accredited with the Consumer Focus Confidence Code: USwitch (tel.: 0800 051 5493; [www.uswitch.com](http://www.uswitch.com)), Energy Helpline (tel.: 0800 074 0745; [www.energyhelpline.com](http://www.energyhelpline.com)), Simply Switch (tel.: 0800 011 1395; [www.simplyswitch.com](http://www.simplyswitch.com)) or the Energy Shop (tel.: 0845 330 7247; [www.theenergyshop.com](http://www.theenergyshop.com)).
- All energy suppliers have to offer lower 'social tariffs' to their most vulnerable customers. You may qualify for a social tariff if you are over 60, on means tested benefits, chronically sick or are in 'fuel poverty' (you spend more than 10% of your income on energy costs). The discount can be worth £200-250 a year. For more information, contact your energy supplier or the Home Heat Helpline (tel.: 0800 33 66 99; [www.homeheathelpline.org.uk](http://www.homeheathelpline.org.uk)) who can liaise with your supplier on your behalf (see section 3.3).
- Contact your supplier if you do not understand how your bill is calculated – they are there to help you.
- Contact your supplier if you are faced with an energy bill you cannot pay. Explain your situation and offer to pay an amount you can

afford. Some suppliers have trust funds set up to assist people in financial difficulty. You may also want to ensure that you are claiming all the benefits that you are entitled to. Your local Citizens Advice Bureau (tel.: 08444 111 444; [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)) will be able to offer you a benefits check.

- Keep a copy of all your bills in case you need to refer back to them.
- If you have a pre-payment meter for gas or electricity, be aware your charges are likely to be higher than for someone on a direct debit scheme.
- Do not allow estimated bills to continue – you are responsible for all the energy you use. Your supplier will eventually present you with an accurate bill, which could amount to hundreds of pounds. Avoid this by providing your supplier with the correct meter reading as soon as possible.
- Do not assume your supplier's monthly payment predictions are always right. To ensure your payments are covering the energy you are using, ask your supplier to assess your payment plan every six months.
- Do not be afraid to complain or question your supplier about any issues relating to your account.

### **3.3 The Home Heat Helpline**

The Home Heat Helpline (tel.: 0800 33 66 99; [www.homeheathelpline.org.uk](http://www.homeheathelpline.org.uk)) is a free phone helpline offering advice on choosing an energy supplier, getting a cheaper payments scheme, grants for insulating your home, and how to register for extra services and government benefits. Advisors can also speak to your energy supplier on your behalf with your permission. The helpline is open 9am-8pm Monday to Friday and 10am-2pm on Saturdays.

## 4 Reducing your energy bills

In recent months, domestic energy bills have increased substantially. This can cause problems for people on a limited income. A good way to reduce your energy bills and save money is to make your home more energy efficient. You could consider the following:

- Install cavity wall insulation. Around a third of all the heat in your home is lost through the walls. Cavity wall insulation can help to reduce your energy bills.
- Install loft insulation. Lining your loft with 25 centimetres of insulation can save you a quarter of your home's heating costs.
- Replace old light bulbs with energy saving bulbs. An energy saving light bulb will reduce energy consumption and lasts up to 10 times longer than the ordinary light bulbs.
- If your boiler is over 15 years old consider switching to a new energy efficient version. High efficiency condensing-boilers can save up to a third of your annual heating bills.
- Turn your thermostat down. Just by turning your thermostat down by 1°C could cut your heating bills by up to 10%. Make sure that you do not set it below the recommended World Health Organisation temperature of 21°C in your living room and 18°C in other rooms.
- Make sure your hot water thermostat is not turned up too high. Your cylinder thermostat should not be any higher than 60°C.
- Do not leave appliances on standby and do not leave appliances, such as mobile phones, charging unnecessarily.
- Use the half-load or economy programmes if you are not filling up the washing machine, tumble dryer or dishwasher to full capacity.

- When using the kettle, only boil as much water as you need, but remember to cover the elements if you're using an electric kettle.
- Make sure taps are fully turned off and repair any leaking taps. A dripping hot water tap can waste enough hot water to fill half a bath in just one week.
- Close your curtains at night to stop heat escaping. Consider fitting draught excluders in the gap around windows and doors.
- Defrost your freezer regularly to keep it running efficiently.
- When choosing a new appliance, such as a fridge, freezer, washing machine or dishwasher, choose a model with a high energy efficiency rating, ideally A-rated (ratings are from A to G, with A being the most efficient and G being the least efficient).
- Fit a jacket to your hot-water tank. This could save you around £15 a year in heating bills.

How many of those changes could you make? By being more energy efficient you could significantly reduce your energy bill. For more information on saving energy at home, contact the Energy Saving Trust (tel.: 0800 512 012; [www.energysavingtrust.org.uk](http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk)).

## **5 Financial assistance to help with heating costs**

### **5.1 Warm Front Grants**

Warm Front Grants provide money to home owners and private tenants on a low income, who live in properties with poor insulation and/or without a working central heating system, to improve the heating and insulation of their homes.

The Warm Front Grant provides a package of energy efficiency and heating measures up to the value of £3,500 (or up to £6,000 where oil, low carbon or renewable technologies are recommended). You will not have to pay anything as long as the work does not cost more than the grant available. If the cost of the work is more than the grant available you will have to make a contribution to enable work to go ahead.

Grants are available for improvements such as:

- loft insulation
- draught proofing
- cavity wall insulation
- hot water tank insulation
- gas, electric, liquid petroleum gas or oil heating
- glass-fronted fire installation

To qualify for Warm Front Grant you must either own your home or rent it from a private landlord. You also need to be in receipt of certain qualifying benefits such as Pension Credit or income-related Employment and Support Allowance (that includes a work-related activity or support component).

For further information and to apply for a Warm Front grant contact Carillion (tel.: 0800 316 2805; [enquiry@carillionplc.com](mailto:enquiry@carillionplc.com)) (formally known as Eaga) who administer the scheme in England. Alternatively you can apply online at:

<https://web.eagagroup.com/referrerEBS/createReferralPublic.pdo?referrer=WFPUB>

If you are a council tenant and you want to improve the insulation of your home you should contact your local housing department to ask about any energy efficiency grants that may be available. The council has a general power to help improve living conditions and may have a timetable of planned work that includes increasing the energy efficiency of their properties.

## **5.2 Warm Front £300 Rebate**

The Warm Front £300 Rebate scheme for people who did not qualify for a Warm Front Grant closed in March 2011. If you have any queries about the rebate please contact the Heating Rebate Team (tel.: 0191 2458682; [warmfrontrebate@eaga.com](mailto:warmfrontrebate@eaga.com)).

## **5.3 Warm Home Discount Scheme**

The Warm Home Discount scheme was introduced in April 2011 to reduce fuel poverty. It replaces the previous voluntary arrangements for utility providers to give discounts to their most vulnerable customers. The scheme requires by law, energy providers to provide older people and low-income households with an annual rebate on their energy bills.

If you receive the Guarantee Credit element of Pension Credit you will automatically receive an annual rebate of £120 on your energy bill. You will

not qualify for the rebate if you receive the Savings Credit element of Pension Credit.

Energy providers also have to provide an annual rebate to customers who would not fall into the above group but are still in or at risk of 'fuel poverty'. Energy providers will set their own eligibility criteria for customers who fall under this category. Each supplier will issue information about their criteria in the coming months.

If you qualify you will get a letter to confirm this and the rebate will be made by your energy provider automatically in the winter of 2011/12.

For more information, see the DirectGov website:

[www.direct.gov.uk/en/Pensionsandretirementplanning/Benefits/BenefitsInRetirement/DG\\_185940](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Pensionsandretirementplanning/Benefits/BenefitsInRetirement/DG_185940)

#### **5.4 Winter Fuel Payments**

Winter Fuel Payments are annual one-off, non means-tested payments to older people to help with the additional cost of keeping warm over the winter months.

To qualify for a Winter Fuel Payment you must:

- Have been born on or before 5 January 1951. (The qualifying age for Winter Fuel Payment for both men and women is rising in line with the increase in women's State Pension age).
- Normally live in the U.K on any day in the week of 17-23 September 2012.

The amount you will receive depends on your circumstances: how old you are, what benefits you receive and who you live with. To see how much

your Winter Fuel Payment is likely to be, see:

[www.direct.gov.uk/en/Pensionsandretirementplanning/Benefits/BenefitsInRetirement/DG\\_179916](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Pensionsandretirementplanning/Benefits/BenefitsInRetirement/DG_179916)

Most payments will be made between November and December 2012. If you have not received your payment by January 2013 contact the Winter Fuel Payments Helpline (tel.: 0845 915 15 15).

If you have previously received a Winter Fuel Payment and there has been no change in your circumstances, you do not need to reapply as you should automatically get your payment. If you have not received a Winter Fuel Payment before but you are already receiving a State Pension or another benefit, you should receive a payment automatically.

If you have any questions about Winter Fuel Payments or you would like to apply as you would not receive a payment automatically, contact the Winter Fuel Payments helpline (tel.: 0845 915 15 15).

## **5.5 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, below, 0°C for seven consecutive days in your local area. To be eligible you must be receiving Pension Credit, Income Support, income-based Job Seeker's Allowance or income-based Employment Support Allowance. You should receive your payment automatically, usually into the same bank or building society account as your other benefit payments. For more information about Cold Weather Payments, contact your local Jobcentre Plus office. The contact details of your local office can be found in your local telephone directory, or by visiting the Jobcentre Plus website: [www.jobcentre.gov.uk](http://www.jobcentre.gov.uk)

This factsheet is not a full explanation of the law and is aimed at people aged over 60

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