

Heatwave in Europe: local resilience saves lives – global collaboration will save humanity

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Unprecedented. Frightening. Apocalyptic. These are just some of the adjectives used in news reports as vast swathes of the WHO European Region suffer from ferocious wildfires and record-breaking high temperatures amid an ongoing, protracted heatwave. Climate change is not new. Its consequences, however, are mounting season after season, year after year, with disastrous outcomes.

Heat kills. Over the past decades, hundreds of thousands of people have died as a result of extreme heat during extended heatwaves, often with simultaneous wildfires. This year, we have already witnessed more than 1700 needless deaths in the present heatwave in Spain and Portugal alone.

Wildfires – well known for their disastrous consequences in southern Europe – are now occurring as far north as Scandinavia, and this week fires in London have destroyed 41 homes. This scorching summer season is barely halfway done.

Extreme heat exposure often exacerbates pre-existing health conditions. Heatstroke and other serious forms of hyperthermia – an abnormally high body temperature – cause suffering and premature death. Individuals at either end of life's spectrum – infants and children, and older people – are at particular risk.

WHO/Europe guidance supports national and local authorities in essential preparation for extreme heat events. When they are operational, comprehensive heat–health action plans have been shown to save lives and strengthen the resilience of communities and people to cope during extreme heat.

The WHO guidance and heat–health action plans provide practical advice to the public and medical professionals on how to respond to heatwaves, as well as advice aimed at those tending to patients and individuals in hospitals and other care facilities, including care homes for older people.

Here are some basic steps that everyone should take to safeguard themselves and their loved ones.

- **Keep out of the heat as much as possible, including at night, avoiding strenuous physical activity and ensuring children and animals are not left in parked vehicles.**
- **Keep your body cool and hydrated. Use light and loose-fitting clothing and bed linen, take cool showers or baths, and drink regularly while avoiding alcohol, caffeine and sugary drinks. If necessary and possible, try to spend 2–3 hours of the day in a cool place.**
- **Keep your home as cool as you can. Use the night air to cool down your home and reduce the heat load inside your apartment or house during the day by using blinds or shutters.**
- **Seek medical advice if you are suffering from a chronic condition or taking multiple medications. If you feel dizzy, weak or anxious, or experience intense thirst and headache, move to a cooler place.**
- **Help others by checking on family and friends, including older people living alone.**

Ultimately, this week's events point yet again to the desperate need for pan-European action to effectively tackle climate change – the overarching crisis of our time that is threatening both individual health and the very existence of humanity.

For this to happen, governments need to demonstrate political will and genuine leadership in implementing the global Paris Agreement on climate change, with collaboration replacing division and empty rhetoric.

Reinforcing the position of the Paris Agreement as a health treaty, the COP26 Health Programme was launched in the lead-up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference last year. It calls on health systems to assume their share of the responsibility to step up their resilience to, and fight against, climate change.

This approach is embedded within the European Programme of Work 2020–2025, a guiding framework for WHO/Europe that was agreed upon by all 53 Member States of the Region. It provides a gateway to joint action on multiple fronts – including strengthening environmental health and reversing the ravages of climate change.

WHO/Europe Member States have already demonstrated that they can work together on urgent threats to global health. It is time for us to do so again, working across ministerial boundaries and

across national borders to tackle the root causes of climate change – making wise, far-reaching choices for the common good.

Addressing leaders from more than 40 countries at the Petersberg Climate Dialogue in Berlin, Germany, earlier this week, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres issued a stark warning: “We have a choice. Collective action or collective suicide. It is in our hands.”

The millions of our fellow citizens suffering in the European Region at this time would surely agree.