

# Simple steps to stop people dying from heatwaves

As much of the world roasts, don't despair

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WHEN A HEATWAVE in Europe killed more than 70,000 people in 2003, it was seen as a once-in-a-millennium event. Today, experts say, such blistering heat can be expected once a decade.

Worldwide, last year the months of June, July and August were the hottest on record. August 2023 was on average 1.5°C hotter than the same month between 1850 and 1900. This year could be even worse.

The bad news is on every screen this summer. In Saudi Arabia, as temperatures hit 50°C in the shade, 1,300 of the pilgrims who flocked to Mecca for the *hajj* have died. On June 23rd 100m Americans were living in areas subject to heat warnings, with Baltimore and Philadelphia approaching a scorching 40°C. Indians suffered 40,000 cases of heatstroke between March and mid-June, with Delhi recently enduring 40 consecutive days over 40°C. Far from being a series of freak events, this is the new normal.

The good news, however, is that even as temperatures soar, deaths can be avoided and economic disruption can be minimized. Rich, hot places such as Phoenix, Kuwait and Singapore are adapting, as did parts of Europe after that heatwave two decades ago. Rather than swooning helplessly, the rest of the world should look and learn. The basic idea is simple: get people out of the sun and into the cool.

Extreme heat can cause heatstroke, heart problems and dehydration. Populations that are not used to it are more vulnerable. So are the elderly, whose health is often fragile and who find it harder, if stuck, to move somewhere cooler. And the poor suffer most: they are more likely to labor in the sun and live in cramped, ill-ventilated homes. A Mumbai slum can be 6°C hotter than nearby apartments.

Air conditioning, where affordable, is part of the answer. If powered by renewable energy, it is not bad for the climate, and it can save lives. A study in the *Lancet* concluded that there were 345,000 heat-related deaths worldwide in 2019 among the over-65s, and that the toll would have been 50% higher without air conditioning. So environmentalists are wrong to shun this wonderful technology. Since the organizers of the Paris Olympics decided not to install air conditioners in athletes' quarters, many teams will simply bring their own.

Rethinking how cities are built can help, too. Architects in Singapore design buildings to funnel wind around the city, while a vast tree-planting effort provides shade and retains moisture.

However, it takes time and a mountain of cash to redesign a city. That is why quicker, cheaper fixes are needed.

Three stand out. First, workplaces and schools need to be more flexible. In America states such as California and Washington have rules that mandate shade and water breaks for outdoor workers when it is excessively hot. More places need similar guidelines. Also, children should be allowed to study from home and public events should be cancelled when the temperature is too high.

The second step is to create more chilled public spaces to provide relief and refuge. Some American cities have “cooling centers”—as do others in India and Vietnam. Often these are ordinary buildings with air conditioning, from libraries to offices, that can temporarily be opened to all. Even simple adaptations can make a difference: painting a roof white can cut indoor temperatures by several degrees.

### Cool it

Finally, governments and citizens need to be better prepared, particularly in places that are unused to roasting temperatures. After the emergency in 2003 France was shocked into creating a national plan for heatwaves, with an early-warning system and guidelines on everything from sporting events to training medical staff. During a record-breaking heatwave in 2019, the country had 90% fewer casualties than in 2003.

Rules should be set by central governments, but the responsibility to enact them should be delegated to cities and towns. Because extreme heat varies according to local conditions, they are best placed to sound the alarm, and citizens can hold local governments accountable if they fail to plan properly. Baking summers are now inevitable. Escalating suffering and deaths are not.

(AA note: Not mentioned in this article is the [single most important action](#) – significantly decreasing carbon emissions, without which the world will just get hotter and hotter and more and more people will die. We all need to do our part in this effort.)