



Heat-waves: risks and responses





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Foreword

This important publication, reviewing the effects of heat stress on health and potential strategies to reduce vulnerability to thermal stress, is the work of a strong collaborative team of investigators from several European countries. It is particularly timely given the high-profile effects of the heat-wave in France in 2003 that have reinforced the need for societies to cope more effectively with heat-waves.

The ageing of the European population, together with the potential effects of climate change, may exacerbate the threats to human health posed by thermal stress in the future. Heat-health warning systems offer the potential for collaboration between meteorological agencies and health authorities. However, merely issuing warnings is unlikely to substantially reduce heat-related deaths. Community outreach to vulnerable groups will be necessary, and the impact of such systems must be evaluated to ensure that they deliver the promise of reducing heat-related deaths. The challenge of reducing the effects of thermal stress, especially on elderly people, also requires commitment from policy-makers and building designers to improve indoor environments without using approaches that lead to increases in greenhouse gas emissions. Health researchers and those studying the built environment need to collaborate to determine cost-effective designs to reduce thermal stress.

This publication makes an important contribution to understanding of the effects of thermal stress and effective responses. It complements other work such as that on the health effects of floods and the effects of climate on infectious diseases that has been undertaken under the Climate Change and Adaptation Strategies for Human Health (cCASHh) project. The contributors to this publication are to be congratulated on marshalling existing evidence in an accessible form and indicating research questions that still need to be addressed.

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Foreword

When the Climate Change and Adaptation Strategies for Human Health (cCASHh) project started on 1 May 2001, few people would have thought that its results would be so timely.

The heat-wave of August 2003 in Europe and its high toll of victims in various parts of Europe have made it clear once again that no one on this planet will remain unaffected by the effects of climate change. One heat-wave does not prove that the world is getting hotter, but last summer's weather fit a global trend that has seen previous records shattered with increasing regularity. Although the historical data for heat-waves may leave much to be desired, the August heat-wave in Europe has certainly broken all records for heat-induced human deaths.

This publication summarizes the findings of work package 3 of the project Vulnerability Assessment of thermal stresses. It shows that health care and social systems are ill prepared for thermal stresses and that intervention plans and effective technical intervention are lacking. The publication identifies the research gaps and formulates recommendations.

Relatively little research has been carried out on the effects of climate change on human health. This type of research requires an interdisciplinary approach. The cCASHh project is a good example. Coordinated by WHO, it comprises eight partners from six countries and brings together researchers from different disciplines.

Congratulations to all the participants for their hard work in producing this important and comprehensive publication.

Karin Zaunberger
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