



Summer heat and mental illness: A dangerous combination

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Some psychiatric medications increase heat intolerance, mental health officials warn patients and their caregivers.

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- The Alabama Department of Mental Health issued a special warning today to highlight the dangers that hot summer days pose for people with mental illness.

State mental health officials said the mentally ill are especially vulnerable to heat-related illnesses and death. They cite a new British Journal of Psychiatry study that estimates that when temperatures exceed 90 degrees Fahrenheit, those diagnosed with mental illness and treated with psychiatric drugs have a 40 percent greater risk of heat-related death than the general population.

The department said while everyone needs to drink plenty of fluids on hot days like these, it's especially important for those with mental illnesses.

"Individuals with mental illnesses need to stay hydrated during periods of extreme heat since their medications make them susceptible to heat stroke, and they are more likely to develop certain types of medication toxicities," said Dr. Timothy Stone, the department's medical director. "Each year in the summer, people with mental illnesses die from heat strokes because they and/or their caregivers may not be aware of the dangers."

The department said that while heat is always a concern in July and August in Alabama, this year seems to be shaping up as even more of a scorcher than usual.

Medications aren't the only reasons this poses a threat to people with mental illnesses. Stone said people with mental illnesses also may have a lack of awareness, may not have access to air conditioning and may be socially isolated. "These individuals sometimes don't have anyone checking in on them," Stone said.

To raise awareness, Stone has written a **report** that lists some psychiatric medications associated with heat intolerance. It also provides more generic information about preventing heat-related problems and recognizing the danger signs. The report also steers people who more **information** to the Centers for Disease Control.

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