

HEAT-SUSCEPTIBILITY IN OLDER PERSONS AND BARRIERS TO ADAPTATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Background and Aims: Extreme heat is a well documented threat to health, and for reasons which are not fully understood, older persons are known to be most at risk. With heatwaves being a common occurrence during Australian summers, behavioural adaptation is important for heat-health, and factors limiting adaptive capacity in vulnerable subpopulations need to be identified. The aim of this study was to investigate stakeholders' perceptions and experiences of heat-susceptibility in older persons, and to identify risk factors and barriers to adaptation during extreme heat.

Methods: The study was undertaken in Adelaide, South Australia where a record-breaking heatwave occurred in the summer of 2009. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with 41 respondents including older persons (n=6); and key stakeholders involved in health and aged care, community services, government sectors, emergency services and policymaking (n=35). Topics for discussion included experiences of recent heatwaves, links between age and vulnerability to extreme heat, and obstacles to effective adaptation. Proceedings were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim into text, and analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: The narratives of respondents revealed multiple issues accounting for heat-susceptibility in older persons. Findings showed that adaptive capacity may be influenced by physiological, psychological, socioeconomic and behavioural factors. These included an age-related decline in health with associated comorbidities and the use of certain medications, low fitness, limited fluid intake, diminished awareness, isolation, and financial concerns about power costs. Persons with undiagnosed dementia were noted to be particularly vulnerable. Other issues raised included the design features of some newer cooling devices not being conducive to use by older persons, heat-associated anxieties, and specific issues facing the elderly in rural areas.

Conclusions: Improving heat-health knowledge and addressing the social and economic concerns of older persons may assist in minimising heat-related morbidity and mortality in today's ageing population facing a warming climate.