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Published on June 16, 2022 17:00. Updated on June 20, 2022 10:26.

Heatwaves are getting deadlier – here's how to combat them

By Liv Martin

You've seen the headlines. Historic heatwaves are sweeping across the United States. Southern and central Europe experienced record-breaking temperatures in May. India had the hottest temperatures this March since records were first kept over 120 years ago.

It is barely summer and this year is already presenting us with extraordinary, extreme heat waves. As the planet continues to warm due to climate change, temperatures like these –often over 40ºC (104ºF) – will be something we have to learn to live with.

Rising temperatures will also come with serious consequences. Heatwaves, which are becoming more severe with every passing year, threaten millions with heat-related sickness and death. Francesco Rocca, president of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), calls heatwaves "the silent killers of climate change".

Cities — which have many impermeable surfaces like concrete and are often lacking greenery — are especially at risk. Around the world, experts, organisations, and some politicians are beginning to prepare for the worst. A partnership between the IFRC and C40 Cities, a network of mayors created to address the climate crisis, is leading the way. Here's how.

Preparation is key

"Life-threatening temperatures so early in the season should serve as a dire warning sign to all of us – especially those in cities – to better prepare to manage increasingly dangerous heat waves," Rocca told journalists in Geneva this week.

The IFRC has already been on the front lines of the climate crisis. Around the world, its Red Cross and Red Crescent branches are responding to severe heat warnings with emergency response actions. The French Red Cross has gone door-to-door to check on the most vulnerable. The Vietnam Red Cross runs cooling spaces and goes out into the community to shade tin roofs with tarps and install sprinklers. The Pakistan Red Crescent is training volunteers on how to react to future heat crises.

"When early warning systems are in place and heeded, there is ample time for authorities to act and protect the most vulnerable before a heat crisis happens," Rocca said.

Preparedness measures are also being organised at the city level. Athens, Greece was the first European city to create a new governmental position of chief heat officer, specifically to monitor heat risks. Athens, a C40 city, is testing different cool surfaces and pavements to see what is working best to reduce heat outdoors and inside.

According to Eleni Myrivili, the city's recently appointed chief heat officer, heat waves will double in the next century there. "This is something cities will be facing for years and years to come. We have to start planning cleverly," she said. Athens is also working with the IFRC and Hellenic Red Cross.

The IFRC reiterates that heat-related deaths are almost always preventable when cities and people prepare adequately. It has created a "Heatwave Guide for Cities" and an "Urban Action Kit" to help city officials, planners and organisations plan for heat crises.

Adapting creatively

Countries which have experience with extreme heat are already better adapted. What is worrisome, according to Maarten van Aalst, director of the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, is when very hot conditions appear in areas which have not yet properly adapted.

"Many places get hit by conditions which they just haven't experienced before, and that makes it so impactful compared to if it would have just been a fluke event," he said.

The C40 Cities' Cool Cities Network, working with 37 of the largest cities in the world, is helping urban areas manage heat risks, whether those risks have arrived or not. A long list of in-progress solutions are cropping up in cities around the world. Buenos Aires has proposed the implementation of green roofs and vertical gardens to reduce urban heat. Tel Aviv is piloting solar-powered canopies which create shade during the day and produce light after dark. Tokyo is experimenting with cooling wind tunnels.

Adaptation takes place on nearly every level, from implementing new legislation and building and zoning laws, to creating climate action plans and municipal strategies. C40 has developed resources such as the "Urban Cooling Toolbox" and "Heat Resilient Cities Benefit Tool" to inform cities on heat reduction and adaptation.

In a time when climate adaptation is under-funded, creative solutions are needed more than ever.

"Certainly our cities could use so much more financial support in all aspects of climate adaptation," said Amanda Ikert, C40 Cities adaptation expert. "It's one of those things where unless you're in a heatwave, you feel like you can punt to next year, or put it off into the future. Continued attention is really important."

Raising awareness and the 'perception problem'

A lack of information on how to beat heat can be deadly. Often, people shrug off heat and may not view it as the extreme threat that it is. However, heat-related illnesses can be serious, especially for vulnerable populations. Exposing the body to hot temperatures can lead to shock, dehydration, and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases.

The IFRC introduced its first global Heat Action Day on 14 June to raise awareness around extreme heat impacts. According to Rocca, those at the most risk are "the elderly and the isolated, very young children, pregnant women, people with underlying health conditions and our poorest populations".

And in general, he added, marginalised people such as migrant workers tend to have less access to information and services. Reaching people and educating them about the seriousness of heat are major goals of the IFRC and C40.

"Communication is key," Ikers said. "What are some of the signs? What are some of the conditions you can look for? How can you support neighbours, community members, and especially vulnerable people?"

Even some techniques people use to cool down can lead to problems. Fans, Myrivili said, can become dangerous in a really hot room, leading to severe dehydration.

At the heart of the unawareness, said van Aalst, is an absence of data. Simply put, many heat-related deaths are not being counted as such.

“[A death certificate] will say people have died of dehydration or of a heart attack,” he told Geneva Solutions. “We know there are many countries where people are dying, and we don’t even know how many.”

As the climate changes more rapidly than we can adapt, we’ve reached what van Aalst calls “uncharted territory”. If every summer generates more headlines describing record-breaking, historic, unprecedented heat, it’s time to recognise heatwaves as the serious threat to humanity they are.

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