

# How to create a heat response plan for your family this summer

## Health Observatory at ASU turns research into action for Arizonans

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News  
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If your power goes out during a scorching summer day in the Valley, what will happen to your pets? Where will you sleep?

The [Health Observatory](#), a research initiative at Arizona State University, has created a [Family Heat Response Plan](#) to help Arizonans think about what they would do without air conditioning.

“We’re treating it as the disaster it is,” said [Meaghan Batchelor](#), an epidemiologist and the principal population health data scientist for the Health Observatory at ASU.

She put together the questionnaire that asks users to record things like where they’ll take their pets and which neighbors they’ll check on.

“I grew up in Arizona and I remember practicing fire drills but we never practiced what would happen if the power went out,” she said.

The Health Observatory at ASU, launched in 2024, is an “early warning system” for public health, using data to track and mitigate future crises.

Recently, the Health Observatory added [news-you-can-use content](#) on heat and health, including the heat-response plan (similar to a fire-escape plan), a quiz and a frequently-asked-questions section to provide guidance about living in extreme heat.

The site also connects to state and national resources for people who work in the heat and includes a template for workplaces to draw up a heat illness prevention program.

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**Test your heat knowledge**

“We wanted to make sure the essential information was there but make it a little bit more interactive than a public health pamphlet or a webpage.

“We really try to cater it to everyone because everyone can get heat-related illness,” Batchelor said.

“There are more at-risk groups, of course, but people who have lived their whole lives here can get sick from heat and maybe don’t even think of heat as a threat. If they live in a nice house, their air conditioning could still go out one day. We really try to think of everyone when we’re writing these pages.”

Batchelor, who previously worked as an epidemiologist at the Maricopa County Department of Public Health, feels a strong connection to the work.

“I was reading these death reports of people who had died from heat and it made these cases personal to me,” she said.

“I’m very personally invested in protecting people from extreme heat.”

[Rebecca Sunenshine](#), medical director of the ASU Health Observatory, said that anybody who is struggling financially is at risk for heat-related illness, not just people experiencing homelessness.

“Because our utility bills are so expensive in the summer in Arizona, people will not turn on their air conditioning or they won’t turn it on high enough,” she said.

“And that can put you at risk of dying from heat in your home.”

Power outages do not discriminate, she said.

“You cannot spend the night in an un-air conditioned environment during the summer here when there’s a power outage,” she said.

One of the most important resources to know about is cooling centers, she said.

In the summer of 2005, 35 people died of heat-related illness over nine days in the Phoenix area. That prompted local leaders to create the Heat Relief Network, a collection of cooling centers run by a collaboration of government, nonprofit and faith-based organizations and private businesses. Hundreds of sites, including public libraries and community centers, offer air-conditioned spaces every year from May 1 through Sept. 30.

The ASU pages link to the [public Heat Preparedness Network map](#) maintained by the Maricopa Association of Governments.

The Health Observatory highlights the research of [Jennifer Vanos](#), an associate professor in the School of Sustainability and director of the Human Biometeorology Lab who researches

What is the early, treatable stage of heat illness?

What should you do when someone is hot, confused and stops sweating?

True or false: Feeling thirsty means you’re already dehydrated.

Learn these [answers and other heat facts](#).

Find more [local heat relief resources](#).

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connections between extreme heat and human health in urban areas.

“Cooling centers in Arizona are actually fairly unique. Other people don't utilize the cooling center like we do as a population health prevention measure,” Sunenshine said.

“Dr. Vanos looked at cooling centers and, particularly with seniors, was able to identify how long someone needs to be in a cooling center in order to properly cool down and be able to leave again,” she said.

According to [the research](#), people need to stay in the cooling center for at least 70 minutes to reach a safe body temperature.

“When we get scientific information like that, it can really change prevention across Arizona and the United States,” Sunenshine said.

*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



Graphic by Luke Nagamine/ASU