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AMBIENT HEAT AND EMERGENCY ADMISSION IN THE US

Role of energy in preventing heat related illness

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The study by Sun and colleagues shows the burden of raised temperature extremes on the healthcare system and on morbidity in the United States. These temperatures adversely affect people of all ages, not just older people.¹ Emergency preparedness is briefly discussed but deserves further comment.

The strain of extreme ambient heat on the healthcare system can be exacerbated by power outages, which are not uncommon during extreme heat events.² Outages substantially increase the percentage of the population without adequate air conditioning and might render many smaller healthcare facilities useless, as they often do not have backup power sources. As such, cooling centers might not be able to accommodate all those in need, and hospitals might face a much higher volume and severity of heat related illness.³ How we use energy in society is a central part of preventing morbidity and mortality related to excessive heat and is multifaceted.

Steps to aid critical emergency preparedness must occur across the US. Federal law must be enacted and funding allocated for backup power at smaller healthcare facilities, such as dialysis centers, nursing facilities, and ambulatory care clinics, and large indoor spaces that can be used as cooler centers, given that many do not have adequate emergency power sources.⁴⁻¹⁰ Mobilization of the national guard to run cooling centers and provide lower acuity healthcare services will also be crucial to reduce the burden on hospitals.

As with many preventable illnesses, much progress has been made in the form of treatment and less by way of prevention. Eliminating human impact on global warming and providing safety from ambient heat are increasing in importance daily. But society continues to rely on unreliable sources of energy to provide protection from extreme heat, and this helps to catalyse global warming. The cycle of cooling ourselves with energy that worsens global warming, then using more of the same energy source to cool ourselves must be broken. If not, this preventable public health emergency will no longer be preventable, and will inevitably be untreatable.

Competing interests: None declared.

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