Warm weather increases emergency room visits

High ambient temperatures are associated with adverse health effects and increased death. A recent article published in The BMJ found an association between extreme heat and an increase in the number of visits to the emergency department by adults in the USA.

The associations seen were strongest among young and middle-aged adults, and also more pronounced for men than women. A lower income was also shown to be associated with increased visits, regardless of ambient temperature. The authors hypothesise that occupational and recreational activities might be higher in those groups in which stronger associations were seen, although do not have any data on these characteristics.

The association between heat and emergency department visits was strongest in the north east, which has a cooler overall climate. In contrast, a weaker association was seen in the south east and areas with a tropical climate. This suggests either physiological or behavioural adaptations to heat might reduce risk of adverse effects to heat. This could potentially also explain why elderly people were less adversely impacted by excess heat, as there is greater public awareness of heat-related risks to the elderly. The information presented in this study should encourage there to be a greater awareness of the risks of excess heat on younger populations as well.

Katharine Barnes

Reference

1. Sun, S. et al. Ambient heat and risks of emergency department visits among adults in the United States: time stratified case crossover study. BMJ 375, e065653 (2021).