STAYING SAFE IN HEAT WAVES

Everyone loves a nice summer, but when temperatures rise too high, we all start to suffer. And it’s not just an inconvenience – whole forests can burn down at the smallest spark, crops and livelihoods can be destroyed and, in the worst cases, many people die.

This is what happened in Europe in 2003, when a combination of factors led to a period of persistently high temperatures – too high for mainly older, frail people and children. There was no escape from the heat, especially in the big cities, and around 40’000 people lost their lives (García-Herrera et al., 2010).

The Problem

The mass mortality associated with the 2003 heatwave was due to the consistently high temperatures, all through the night. If the human body becomes too hot for too long, the organs start shutting down.

Due to the continuously increasing temperatures associated with global warming (Mitchell et al., 2016), we will most likely see more of these extreme and dangerous conditions in the future.

We can not reverse these climate changes on short timescales, only keep them from getting even worse.

The Solution

Although we cannot change the climate conditions, there are actions we can undertake to help prevent the increases in death and illness associated with heat waves.

Short-Term:

- **Education** of the public on how to avoid, recognise and deal with heat related health issues.
- **Guidance** for carers, as their patients are at high risk (CDC, 2016)
- **Technology** like air conditioning needs to be standard in care homes and hospital
- **Protocols** for emergency responses during heat crises need to be developed.

Long-Term:

- **Health heat warning systems** with concrete warnings and advice for the public, under periodical evaluation to increase prediction certainty (WHO, 2015).
- **Infrastructure** needs to be adapted and expanded, by establishing cool public areas and albedo-increasing/green spaces in the city, to reduce the build-up of heat (Santamouris, 2014).

Sources:

- CDC - Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, (2016).
- Climate Change and extreme heat events. National center for environmental health.