



Public risk communication in heatwaves: Developing behavioural science informed messages with older adults



“The co-design of a messaging toolkit intended to communicate heat-related risks and behaviours with older adults enabled the direct implementation of user feedback and recommendations into the Adverse Weather and Health Plan, thereby ensuring representation of a key at-risk group (i.e., older adults) in public health guidance” Dr Helena Wehling

Research Context

Heatwaves are increasingly becoming a global burden resulting in early and preventable illness and deaths, particularly in vulnerable groups such as older people and people with chronic health conditions. Risk perception about heat is generally poor, which can be a barrier to the uptake of protective behaviours. The UKHSA developed a single [Adverse Weather and Health Plan \(AWHP\)](#) (published in April 2023) to improve guidance for the health system and raise public awareness of

ways to protect themselves in a heatwave.

Based on our previous scoping review and behavioural science theory we devised updated risk communication messages to help improve understanding of public health advice during hot weather, particularly amongst older adults. These messages were tested in eight focus groups with 50 older adults from identified priority regions in England (London, East Midlands, North West, South West).

Route to Impact

The focus groups findings informed specific recommendations regarding the content of messages to increase acceptability, relevance and understanding for older adults. These included suggestions about how messages should be framed, the type of language used, and the way they should be presented (e.g. by using visuals to make the messages more memorable). The recommendations influenced messaging included in the [Beat the Heat](#) guidance aimed at the general public, guidance specifically aimed at [educational](#) and [social care](#) settings, a [supporting evidence document](#) to underpin the AWHP and an [equity review and impact assessment of the AWHP](#), which was published in March 2024. The findings were also embedded into cross-governmental commissioning guidance exploring behaviour change in heatwaves and discussed in a UKHSA Pulse podcast.

Impact Outcomes

The AWHP, Beat the Heat and other related guidance have been widely shared, including in a [UK Parliament POSTnote on the public health impacts of heat](#), via a UKHSA news story and on Instagram. A post about Beat the Heat by UKHSA on X had 11.600 views. The Beat the Heat guidance has also been promoted by other organisations such as [Age UK](#), [the Local Government Association](#) and [local authorities](#). Through sharing the guidance it is hoped we will see increased engagement in protective behaviours during heatwaves which will bring health benefits to the population, particularly vulnerable older adults. Furthermore, findings and recommendations from the focus group study were disseminated with colleagues, peers and external stakeholders at the UKHSA Annual Conference 2023, and the HPRU Environmental Change and Health Conference 2023.

Making a Difference: Lessons for Success

Working closely with the UKHSA Extreme Weather and Health, and Comms Teams during the development of the AWHP enabled the recommendations from our focus groups to directly influence the guidance. We had opportunities to present our key recommendations for the language and content of the behavioural messages to these teams and be involved in reviewing draft documents so that identified principles were embedded throughout AWHP guidance.

Read the papers

[Adverse Weather and Health Plan \(AWHP\)](#)

[Beat the Heat: staying safe in hot weather](#)

[Beat the Heat: Easy Read Booklet](#)

Find out more

To find out more about this research and the work of the HPRU in Behavioural Science and Evaluation please contact: admin-hprubse@bristol.ac.uk or visit our website <https://hprubse.nihr.ac.uk>