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## New Heat Wave Formula Can Help Public Health Agencies Prepare for Extreme Temperatures

Extreme heat can pose several health risks, such as dehydration, hyperthermia and even death, especially during sustained periods of high temperatures. However, a uniform definition of a heat wave doesn't exist. As a result, public health agencies may be unsure of when to activate heat alerts, cooling centers and other protective measures. A University of Missouri School of Medicine researcher has developed a uniform definition of a heat wave that may help public health agencies prepare for extreme temperatures.

"According to climate models, temperatures in Florida are predicted to increase over the next 100 years, yet there can be confusion regarding what constitutes a heat wave," said Emily Leary, PhD, assistant research professor in the Biostatistics and Research Design Unit at the MU School of Medicine. "As temperatures rise, it's important to have a uniform definition that best allows public health agencies to prepare for heat waves, whether that means issuing more frequent heat advisories or opening more cooling stations. Using Florida as our model — a state known for its heat — we set out to develop a data-driven definition of a heat wave that can be used for public health preparation. This formula can be adapted and applied to other parts of the country as well."

The U.S. National Weather Service currently initiates heat alert procedures when the heat index — the perceived temperature in relation to humidity — is expected to exceed 105 to 110 degrees Fahrenheit, depending on the area. However, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change defines a heat wave as five or more consecutive days with maximum temperatures approximately 9 degrees Fahrenheit higher than normal. These definitions become confusing when different sources use differing methods to define climatology norms, Leary said.

Additionally, the definitions may not be suited for certain regions, such as Florida, because the area may have consistently high temperatures and fewer true seasons, which do not account for extreme temperatures or resident acclimation. Previous research also has shown that using local or region-specific meteorological thresholds better reflect a temperature extreme for a certain area.

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Heat wave image via Shutterstock.

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