

Supporting SEN and disabled students in warm and hot weather



Vulnerability of students with health conditions, SEN and disabilities

Whilst warm and hot weather has a negative impact on all students, this impact is not felt equally. Many students who are disabled (including those who are neurodivergent or have physical or developmental disabilities) or have health conditions (including mental health challenges) are likely to be disproportionately affected. This occurs for several reasons:

- not recognising the bodily sensations associated with overheating and thirst (challenges with interoception – common in neurodivergent people)
- lack of capacity or knowledge to take independent action to cool themselves
- students may potentially travel further to school in a hot vehicle than their peers
- some medications are affected by heat, or have side effects that increase risk (particularly medications for psychiatric conditions, ADHD, allergies and acne)
- neurodivergent students may have increased sensitivity to environmental changes
- neurodivergent students may be more affected by changes to routine and activities
- neurodivergent students may be reluctant or unable to adjust layers or take other adaptive actions due to sensory or routine issues

These impacts can lead to:

- sensory overload
- increased anxiety, stress, dysregulation and meltdowns
- fatigue and exhaustion, potentially exacerbated by disruption to sleep
- reduced concentration and learning capacity
- reduced ability to think clearly and make good decisions
- increased risk of self-injurious behaviours
- physical health complications, including an increased risk of seizures
- dehydration, heat exhaustion or heatstroke
- increased sun sensitivity (students taking retinoids, antibiotics, NSAIDs, antifungals)

Duties to address the needs of disabled students

Under the Equality Act 2010, schools and local authorities owe duties to disabled children. The duty to make reasonable adjustments is anticipatory. It requires schools to think in advance about barriers disabled pupils may face and to take reasonable steps to remove or minimise those barriers.

Documents such as EHCPs and pupil passports, along with regular communication with parents or carers, should be used to identify heat risk and reasonable adjustments.

Actions to support SEN and disabled students

- have individual risk assessments or accommodations within EHCPs and personal passports for students who are likely to be disproportionately affected by overheating
- if students appear to be overheating and not taking appropriate adaptive action, rather than asking if they are hot/thirsty (which they may not recognise), descriptive prompts can help identify physical indicators – see below for examples
- monitor students who may not have the capacity to remove jumpers independently, as they may not want to ask for help
- seat vulnerable students in the coolest part of the classroom
- put flexible uniform code, drink and toilet breaks in place
- provide respite access to cooler areas
- reduce physical and cognitive demands on students
- provide flexibility regarding attendance if high temperatures in school may exacerbate medical or sensory issues (DfE guidance is that code C may be used – authorised absence - if attending would be “unsafe”)

Many of the example actions in the heat action plan, as well as the information sheets ‘Ready to learn in warm and hot weather’ and ‘Respond to student needs in warm and hot weather’ will be of particular benefit to SEN students.

Allowing all students flexibility with uniform, drink breaks and toileting breaks reduces the risk of disabled students from feeling singled out and will benefit the whole class.

Example prompts to identify overheating or thirst

- ‘If your body is sweaty or your skin feels warm it may mean you are hot, maybe you could remove your jumper to cool down.’
- ‘If you are getting a headache in the sun, it might be a sign that you are getting too hot, perhaps you could move to a shady spot or wear a hat.’
- ‘If your throat and mouth feel scratchy and dry you are probably thirsty, have a drink of cool water.’
- ‘When you go to the toilet, your wee should be light yellow. If it is dark yellow then you might be dehydrated and need to drink some water.’