

When the heat rises, discipline matters more than motivation

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STEP outside lately and the shift is immediate, in how the body responds, with fatigue setting in earlier, movement feeling heavier, and routines that once felt sustainable now requiring deliberate adjustment, and across Malaysia this shift is quietly reshaping daily behaviour as more time is spent indoors where

temperature feels manageable, yet this response, when repeated over days and weeks, carries a consequence that is rarely acknowledged but deeply significant in a population already burdened by chronic disease.

Heat does not only affect comfort, it disrupts behaviour in ways that accumulate over time, and when physical activity is paused, even temporarily, it becomes difficult to regain the same level of consistency, with measurable physiological consequences, as blood pressure rises, glycaemic control becomes less stable, body weight trends upward, and mental well-being declines, and in Malaysia where non communicable diseases account for approximately 74% of total deaths, even short periods of reduced activity during prolonged heat exposure can exacerbate an already critical a critical health challenge.

What is unfolding now is not incidental, but part of a broader climatic transition already well characterised globally and regionally, with 2024 confirmed as the hottest year on record at approximately 1.55°C above pre industrial levels, and projections indicating a shift towards El Niño conditions by mid-2026, typically associated with prolonged dry spells, reduced rainfall, and sustained surface heating across Southeast Asia. During this phase, atmospheric patterns such as the Madden Julian Oscillation are suppressing cloud formation, increasing solar radiation and limiting evaporative cooling, which explains why the heat now feels persistent rather than episodic.

As highlighted by Dr. Afidah Abidin and Dr. Muhammad Izzad Izhar, the concern is not only the intensity of heat on a given day, but cumulative exposure over consecutive days, where prolonged warmth gradually reduces physical activity across populations without individuals fully recognising the shift, leading to a measurable decline in health behaviour. Exercising in this environment introduces a physiological challenge, as the body must sustain activity while regulating temperature, with blood flow redirected towards the skin to facilitate heat loss, and under Malaysian conditions where humidity often exceeds 80 percent, sweating becomes less effective due to reduced evaporation, resulting in a faster rise in core temperature and increased cardiovascular strain.



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The early signs are often subtle, including fatigue, muscle cramps, lightheadedness, and reduced concentration, yet these represent clear indicators of physiological stress, and when activity continues despite these signals, the condition can progress to heat exhaustion and heatstroke, where body temperature exceeds 40°C and thermoregulation fails, a medical emergency associated with neurological impairment and organ dysfunction. Risk is not evenly distributed, and certain groups carry higher vulnerability including older adults, young children,

individuals with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, kidney conditions, and those not acclimatised to exercising in heat, particularly individuals returning to activity after a prolonged break, where a mismatch between perceived fitness and physiological readiness increases risk.

Responding to these conditions requires adjustment rather than withdrawal, and timing remains one of the most effective interventions, as physical activity should ideally be conducted before 8 a.m. or after 6 p.m. when temperatures are lower, while the period between late morning and mid-afternoon represents peak heat exposure in Malaysia, often exceeding 35°C in open environments.

Hydration must be approached proactively, as thirst indicates fluid deficit, and maintaining consistent fluid intake supports circulation and thermoregulation, with water remaining sufficient for most individuals, while electrolyte replacement is only necessary during prolonged or high intensity activity. Clothing influences heat retention, where lightweight, loose fitting, and light coloured fabrics enhance heat dissipation, while darker and tighter clothing increases heat load, and in an environment where ultraviolet exposure frequently reaches very high levels, protective measures such as head covering and sunscreen reduce both thermal and radiation stress.

Intensity is where most individuals misjudge risk, as there is a tendency to equate effectiveness with effort, yet in hot conditions, lower intensity activity performed consistently provides greater long term benefit than intermittent high intensity effort that cannot be sustained. Indoor environments should be viewed as part of an adaptive strategy, particularly in urban areas where the urban heat island effect sustains higher ambient temperatures due to heat retained by built surfaces, making shaded spaces, covered facilities, and home based exercise important options for maintaining continuity.

The body provides clear signals when limits are being approached, and these should not be ignored, as dizziness, nausea, unusual fatigue, or rapid heart rate require immediate cessation of activity, movement to a cooler environment, and rehydration, while more severe symptoms such as confusion or collapse require urgent medical attention, and when heatstroke is suspected, active cooling with water, ice at the neck and underarms, loosening clothing, and immediate contact with emergency services should be initiated without delay.

Beyond individual behaviour, rising temperatures represent a sustained public health challenge, and adaptation must occur at multiple levels, including flexible working arrangements during extreme heat and urban planning that prioritises shade, ventilation, and green space to reduce population level exposure.

Physical activity remains a fundamental component of health, and its importance does not diminish in difficult conditions, instead it requires a more informed and adaptive approach, and in a climate that is steadily becoming hotter, the ability to remain active safely reflects not just discipline, but an understanding of how to align behaviour with environmental reality. The weather will continue to change, but how we respond remains within our control, and in a hotter Malaysia, protecting health will depend not on avoiding the heat entirely, but on learning how to live, adapt, and remain consistent within it.