



Free N95 face masks being distributed to vulnerable groups, including the elderly, at Kallang Community Club on Oct 15. The issue of daily indoor heat stress is a major one for less well-off seniors who cannot afford air-conditioning, as they are trapped between the persistent haze, rising temperatures and ageing bodies, says the writer. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

The seniors silently enduring chronic heat at home during this haze season

Singapore's cooling centres may help during heatwaves, but some elderly folk face heat every day at home.

Zahirah Suhaimi

Ming, 86, lives on a high floor of a rental block, where she would normally enjoy some breeze. The trouble is that her flatmate often keeps the windows shut and the fan off, and Ming is afraid to complain.

"I don't use the fan for weeks," said Ming. "If I feel a little breeze from the side, I feel okay. Now the weather is too warm. Sometimes when my flatmate is not around, I ventilate the house and hope she doesn't see."

Singapore has become warmer in recent decades and, in 2026, a strengthening El Nino has also brought drier conditions and worsened the haze, making the decision to leave windows open less safe.

But for seniors living without air-conditioning, this creates a cruel catch-22: Shutting out toxic air transforms an already stuffy flat into a stifling heat trap. More needs to be done for seniors like Ming, who are caught between ambient indoor heat and poor outdoor air quality.

Steps are being taken to address the worsening haze situation. It was announced on Oct 14 that masks are being distributed to vulnerable Singaporeans and air-conditioned rooms will open in community clubs and some residents' committee centres. Vending machines for masks have also been rolled out. The Government also said recently that more than 300 cooling

centres will open islandwide if a heatwave is declared.

This is an important start. But while the focus is on the spiking haze, the moves do not address the discomfort of those enduring chronic heat at home in ordinary times.

HOW SEVERE IS THE PROBLEM?

Simply put, the issue of daily indoor heat stress is a major one for less well-off seniors who cannot afford air-conditioning, as they are trapped between the persistent haze, rising temperatures and ageing bodies that find it harder to cope with heat stress.

Some assume that people of Ming's generation who grew up without air-conditioning are accustomed to the heat. However, over the past year, our team from the Centre for Ageing Research and Education at Duke-NUS Medical School sat with 24

seniors aged 60 and above, many living in one-room public rental flats and managing several chronic illnesses. We saw how they were enduring the heat.

Part of the reason is medical. As people age, their ability to sweat and regulate body temperature declines. Seniors are also less likely to recognise thirst, and are more prone to dehydration.

The risk is greater for those with cardiovascular disease: The body's effort to cool itself by drawing blood to the skin places additional strain on an already stressed heart, increasing the risk of collapse from heat stress, according to research by the National University of Singapore.

A review of heat-injury cases at the Singapore General Hospital by Duke-NUS researchers found that older people accounted for only a small fraction of the 426 cases recorded over 12 years. Yet, both deaths in the data set were among older patients.

Air-conditioning is not an option for many seniors. For some, even a fan is out of reach.

A 2026 study by the Singapore University of Technology and Design entailed visits to 400 Housing Board flats where the households included older people and lower-income families. More than half of these flats were warmer than it was outdoors, largely because of poor airflow.

The study also found that about one-third of homes were up to 2 deg C warmer than their immediate void decks. In one home, the heat index reached 35.9 deg C compared with the outdoor temperature of 31.1 deg C.

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Active ageing centres and befriending services regularly contact older people at risk of social isolation. Heat could become one more thing these visits check for: Is the flat dangerously hot? Is there adequate ventilation or basic air filtration? Is the person able to keep cool? Is there someone to call for help?

Someone like Ming could also get help. Under the operator-run Joint Singles Scheme, the social service agency that matches single flatmates to share a public rental flat also mediates disputes. It could resolve her issue of the shared fan with her flatmate before it becomes a stand-off.

There are clearer protocols in place if a heatwave is declared. Public agencies will work with community partners to reach out to vulnerable groups and support them.

There is also a precedent for proactive outreach during periods of environmental stress. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Singapore deployed mobile recovery teams to check on older people recovering at home. A similar approach could be considered during a heatwave or prolonged haze episode: Identify vulnerable older people in advance and check on them, rather than wait for them to seek help.

Emergency shelters will be set up once a heatwave plan is activated. But it is also important to remind people where they can go to escape everyday heat: a void deck, a library, a place of worship or an easy-to-reach kopitiam. These are familiar places they already spend time in.

COMMUNICATE BETTER

Reaching people is not only about checking on them at home. Heat, framed as a collective experience, opens a different door. "So hot, come cool off" or "so hazy, come get clear air" offers solidarity in our collective experience.

The same principle should apply to climate communication more broadly: It needs to be relatable, action-oriented and memorable. In a focus group in March 2025, 12 older individuals were quick to show what rang false for them in climate messages. An upbeat reel struck them as unserious ("The narrator is smiling," one said, pointing to the floods and heatwaves behind her), while a plain re-enactment of workers in the heat was "more realistic, can relate".

We also learnt that the people struggling most with heat stress are the least able to say so, because the words with which we reached out to them – "climate" and "weather" – were not words that they used to describe their experience. What they could relate to was the heat on their skin, the breathlessness and the sleepless nights.

During warmer weather and hazier conditions, strengthening our social compact means ensuring that those unable to ask for help are still found.

That is why we keep returning to Ming, who is still, in her words, hoping for the breeze and clearer air conditions. There is much more to learn by listening to her.

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