



Portugal | Contingency Plan for the Seasonal Health Response

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Background and objectives

Portugal is one of Europe's most climate-vulnerable countries, with rising average temperatures, more frequent and intense heatwaves, and an ageing, predominantly urban population particularly exposed to extreme heat. In this context, the Directorate-General for Health (DGS) has coordinated national contingency planning since 2004 to protect public health from temperature-related risks. Building on these efforts, the Seasonal Health Response Plan – Summer Module, updated under Order No. 11425/2024, provides the strategic and operational framework for managing health risks associated with heat and other seasonal hazards.

Activated between 1 May and 30 September, the plan aims to reduce heat-related mortality and morbidity and to ensure an effective, equitable health response during periods of high thermal stress. It links environmental monitoring, weather forecasting, and health data to guide preventive and responsive action at national and local levels.

Key objectives include:

- Strengthening health risk assessment in the spring-to-summer transition, integrating meteorological, epidemiological, and environmental information.
- Reducing exposure to extreme heat, particularly among vulnerable groups, by promoting cooling, adequate ventilation, and identification of temporary shelters in cooperation with municipalities and civil protection.
- Ensuring continuity and capacity of health services, through the extension of primary care opening hours, reinforcement of emergency and hospital units, and coordination across the SNS 24 line, primary care, and hospitals.
- Enhancing communication and health literacy, encouraging protective behaviours, efficient use of health services, and community engagement.
- Fostering intersectoral collaboration between the health, social, and local governance sectors to ensure rapid, inclusive, and equitable responses to heat-related threats.

Key features

The Plan is a national strategy that operationalises Portugal's health response to extreme heat and related seasonal risks. It integrates environmental monitoring, risk assessment, and community engagement to protect vulnerable populations and strengthen climate resilience within the health system.

- *Focus on vulnerable groups.*

The plan prioritises people most exposed to heat stress—older adults, children, pregnant women, persons with chronic diseases or reduced mobility, outdoor workers, the homeless, and those in social isolation. Preventive actions include ensuring access to hydration, shaded or air-conditioned spaces, home visits, and the identification of temporary cooling shelters in collaboration with municipalities and civil protection.



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- *Risk management framework.*

The framework is structured along four main axes:

1. Risk identification (monitoring heat, air quality, infectious diseases, and accident trends);
 2. Risk assessment (integrating local and national meteorological and epidemiological data, including heat mortality and morbidity rate);
 3. Risk management (activating preventive, organisational, and clinical measures across all health levels);
 4. Risk communication (ensuring timely, accessible information to professionals, partners, and the public).
- *Cooling and adaptive health measures.*

Key actions include promoting adequate ventilation and indoor air-conditioning, establishing *Temporary Cooling Locations* for public use, and maintaining thermal comfort in healthcare and social facilities. Primary care services extend opening hours and reinforce emergency capacity to meet demand peaks. Public health campaigns emphasise hydration, sun protection, light clothing, and avoidance of strenuous outdoor activity during peak hours.

- *Communication and community engagement.*

The plan's communication strategy uses multi-channel outreach—SNS 24 line, institutional websites, social media, local radio, and networks of community actors (firefighters, municipalities, religious leaders). Messaging focuses on self-protection, safe health service use, and community vigilance for isolated or at-risk persons.

- *Coordination*

Led by the Directorate-General for Health (DGS) and the Executive Directorate of the National Health Service (DE-SNS), the plan involves a wide network of institutions (INSA, INFARMED, INEM, SPMS, IPST, SUCH, and others). Local Health Units (ULS) implement contingency plans and coordinate community-level actions through designated health authorities. Weekly coordination meetings take place to ensure integration from national to local response levels.

- *Continuous monitoring and evaluation*

Continuous monitoring combines meteorological forecasts, health service demand, and mortality data in real time. Annual evaluation of national and local contingency plans ensures evidence-based adaptation and continuous improvement of the seasonal health response. The plan provides an annex with indicators that can help monitoring and evaluation.

Implementation

The Contingency Plan for the Seasonal Health Response, established by legal mandate, requires all entities within the National Health Service (SNS) to develop and implement local contingency plans.

Serving as a national coordination framework, the plan guides and aligns efforts across Regional Health Administrations and SNS institutions. Its implementation includes setting clear objectives, measures, methodologies, and communication channels tailored to both regional and local levels.

The Directorate-General of Health (DGS) is responsible for assessing and communicating health risks and issuing preventive recommendations. Timely access to meteorological data, exceptional event alerts, and health service usage allows Regional Health Administrations and individual Health Units to plan and adapt their responses [2].

Budget (or other cost data)

No information found.

Results and impacts

No information found.

Lessons learnt

Portugal's plan highlights the importance of integrating meteorological, environmental, and health data to enable early warning and targeted action during heat events. The plan's multi-sectoral coordination—linking health services, social institutions, and civil protection—can better ensure that vulnerable populations are effectively identified and protected. The structured monitoring framework, supported by an annex of defined indicators, can facilitate systematic evaluation and continuous improvement of national heat-health and cooling strategies.

Sources

[1] https://www.sns.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20250331-V2_Plano_Resposta_Sazonal_Saude_Verao_2025_Final.pdf (translated with the [European Commission's translation tool](#))

[2] <https://heathealth.info/resources/plano-de-contingencia-para-a-resposta-sazonal-em-saude-portugal-contingency-plan-for-seasonal-health-response/>