

Extreme Temperatures in Europe Are the New Covid for Older Adults

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to Europe's elderly is now widespread, with southern European nations being joined by others as far north as Belgium in putting heat plans in place, many aimed at safeguarding older populations.

For Italy, the extreme heat has forged a pincer with the country's most pressing demographic trend — an aging population — to present an especially acute crisis. About 24 percent of Italians are over 65, making it the oldest country in Europe, and over four million of them live alone.

Last year, Italy was exposed to extreme temperatures longer than most other European countries, enduring three major heat waves. Almost 30 percent of the 61,000 people estimated to have died last summer from extreme heat in Europe were Italians, with age playing a significant factor. The number of Italians over 80 is now about 4.5 million, almost double the number of 20 years ago.

“Older people with pre-existing illnesses are more vulnerable,” Andrea Ungar, the president of Italy's Society of Gerontology and Geriatrics, said in a phone interview. **“But poverty and isolation also play a crucial role.”**

Europe's hottest summer on record, in 2003, left more than 70,000 people dead, by some estimates, and since then Italy has only grown older. It has struggled to adapt.

“It was hot even before 2003 in Italy, and we already had a large population of elderly people, but not like nowadays,” said Francesca De Donato, the epidemiologist whose department gathers meteorological and demographic data from across the country to issue the daily bulletins for heat-related health warnings, tailored by city.

“The quota of people at risk has been constantly growing here,” Ms. De Donato noted.

After 2003, Italy became one of the first countries in Europe to put in place a national plan to mitigate the impact of extreme heat, based on the guidelines from the World Health Organization.

The measures include an alert system to warn people to modify their behavior to safeguard their health. Authorities have recently urged hospitals and general practitioners to pay special attention to the most vulnerable people, and they have set up a free phone number where people can seek advice or help for heat-related problems.

Days like Wednesday, when the heat wave peaked, are marked in red on the daily bulletin that Italy's Health Ministry issues to

Niki Kitsantonis contributed reporting from Athens; Catherine Porter from Paris; and Monica Pronczuk from Brussels.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALESSANDRO PENSO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Clockwise from top: Carlotta Antonelli, at right, a social worker in Rome, checking on Donata Grillo; tourists braving the heat; and Francesca Azzarita, 91, who was also visited by Ms. Antonelli. “Temperatures have changed since I was a girl,” Ms. Azzarita said.

warn residents. Television channels periodically broadcast the ministry's guidelines, advising people to stay indoors during the hottest hours; to wear light clothes and sunscreen; to drink lots of water, eat fresh fruits and avoid coffee and alcoholic beverages; and to be particularly careful when going outside.

France, which has been largely spared the heat waves this summer, has a heat tax to fund programs to protect its most vulnerable people, including regular telephone check-ins or in-person visits during heat waves. It also has a heat alert system, or “plan

canicule,” that successive governments have activated every summer since 2003.

The hottest summer on record killed 15,000 in France, the majority of them older people, living alone in city apartments or retirement homes with no air conditioning. Last summer, when successive heat waves hit the country, more than 2,800 French people died, some 80 percent over the age of 75, according to the French public health authority.

As rising temperatures creep north to countries less accustomed to them, Belgium has set up a three-step heat plan, based on

regular monitoring of temperature and ozone levels. In Brussels, seniors and those who feel isolated or vulnerable can register over the phone with municipal authorities, who will check on them regularly as soon as temperatures climb above 84 Fahrenheit. The social workers distribute fluids and check living conditions. Still, Belgium's excess mortality rate rose to 5.7 percent during the hottest months last summer, the highest in 20 years.

In Greece, the country's archaeological sites will be closed between noon and 5.30 p.m. through Sunday, when temperatures are

set to reach 111 in Athens. The Ministry for Civil Protection has said that all government services are “in a state of increased readiness to deal with the consequences of high temperatures.”

There, as elsewhere, the advice from authorities amounts to a simple imperative: Stay home. That has placed a special onus on governments and social workers to make sure isolation itself does not become a hazard.

In Rome, a team of regional health professionals checks in via phone calls with the most vulnerable people, mostly the elderly and infirm, on days flagged orange or

Yet another peril facing vulnerable populations.

red for the most severe heat.

While the hardships and isolation of the most vulnerable in many ways echo the fight against Covid, the pandemic also left some good practices in place, including visiting and treating people in their homes, health officials said. A 2022 law, passed by the government of the former prime minister, Mario Draghi, pushed for better coordination between health services and telemedicine. Italian health authorities are working to have one digital platform with updated patient information that visiting nurses, doctors, emergency services and hospitals can access.

“Covid has shifted the mentality on some services, and that has helped a lot,” said Andrea Barbara, a public health official who oversees services for about a million residents in Rome. “We do more telemedicine, we are increasingly moving equipment — and not the patients — but it takes time.”

Even those who don't need medical aid, assistance remains crucial and, for many vulnerable people, associations like Caritas are still the most reliable weekly help. Ms. Antonelli, the social worker, carried two cases of slightly fizzy water up two flights of stairs for Francesca Azzarita, a 91-year-old who lives alone with nothing to cool herself but a piece of cardboard to use as a fan.

“Carlotta, when you are not coming, I feel like I am lost,” Ms. Azzarita said in a thick Neapolitan accent that she hasn't lost despite living in Rome for almost 50 years.

Ms. Azzarita, a little girl when World War II broke out, never learned to read and write and has worked all her life, first in the countryside around Naples and later as a cleaner in Rome, where she moved after separating from her husband.

Now her morning starts with coffee and a painkiller for her aching legs. She usually cooks for herself alone, but these days, she doesn't turn on the stove because it is too hot and she rarely leaves her home, especially after she fell on the sidewalk last week.

“Temperatures have changed since I was a girl,” she said. “I don't need to watch the TV to know that the rain was normal and the sun was normal, and now it is not.”

She then glanced at Ms. Antonelli, still panting from the stairs. “How would I do without her help?” she said.

Germany Turns to Siestas to Ease a Feverish Summer

By CONSTANT MÉHEUT

A decade ago, in the wake of a financial crisis, Spain's sacred siesta seemed to be under serious threat. Criticism was mounting across Europe that Spain's sluggish economy resulted, in part, from its long midday break. Worried about being stereotyped as a sleepy, lazy country, Spain pledged to abolish the siesta to increase productivity.

The siesta lived on, though rumors of its demise circulated. And now, as Europe has been gripped by more frequent and longer heat waves, other countries have come to see the wisdom of the siesta, including Germany, where a strong work ethic is valued sometimes to the point of mockery.

German newspapers were among those sneering at the siesta during the economic crisis. But this summer, some German officials and work experts are extolling the virtues of a midday break.

“Siesta during the heat is certainly not a bad suggestion,” said Karl Lauterbach, Germany's health minister, reacting to calls this week from top German public health officials to imitate Spain, where many cities still see shops close and streets empty between 2 and 4 p.m.

The heat — temperatures in Germany were around 90 degrees Fahrenheit this week — is forcing people to rethink their way of life and look to southern countries as examples of how to adapt to rising temperatures.

“We should follow the work practices of southern countries during heat,” Johannes Niessen, the chairman of Germany's leading national association of doctors, said in an interview with the news outlet RND this week. “Getting up early, working productively in the morning, and taking a siesta at midday is a concept that we should adopt in the summer months.”

The origins of Spain's famous siesta are a matter of debate. Some say that the practice originated in the country's rural regions, with

Catie Edmondson and Juliette Guéron-Gabriele contributed reporting.



SAMUEL ARANDA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Spain's famed afternoon break is gaining traction in other European countries as temperatures rise.

farmers taking a break to prevent overheating during the hottest hours of the day and returning to the fields when temperatures cooled. Another explanation is that the disjointed day emerged in post-Civil War Spain, when many people worked two jobs, one in the morning and the other in the late afternoon. The siesta has typified Spanish life for decades, although it is less common among many urban Spaniards today.

Still, on a recent afternoon in Granada, in southern Spain, many of the city's shops were closed in the afternoon and locals were holed up in their homes, shutters drawn, as the cobbled streets boiled under temperatures exceeding 90 degrees.

It is a break many still hold dear. In 2015, the mayor of a village near Valencia issued an edict urging residents and visitors not to make noise during the siesta “to guarantee everybody's rest and thus better deal with the rigors of the summer.”

But the siesta has also been the subject of intense ridicule and criticism, particularly after Spain

struggled to recover from a devastating economic crisis in the 2010s.

Even in Spain, a pro-efficiency movement called the National Commission for the Rationalization of Spanish Schedules, which gained momentum after the crisis, contended that the country could become more productive if it adopted a more regular schedule. In 2016, the prime minister at the time, Mariano Rajoy, tried to reduce the time allowed for the siesta to bring the country more in line with the rest of Europe.

The long midday break has pushed dinner in Spain late into the evening, to 9 or 10 p.m., meaning Spaniards sometimes have supper when Germans are already in bed.

Siestas are used to chill, nap, recharge and have lunch. And now that Central and Northern Europe are facing the same extreme temperatures that Spain has been dealing with for years, the siesta seems like a good idea.

“People are not as efficient in strong heat as they are otherwise,” Mr. Niessen, the represent-

ative for German doctors, said.

Several research papers, including by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, have found that napping improves productivity. The benefit of siesta has also been recognized for people's health. Researchers at the University College of London showed in a study published last month that regular napping may help protect the brain's health as it ages.

The team of researchers estimated that “the average difference in brain volume between people programmed to be habitual nappers and those who were not was equivalent to 2.6 to 6.5 years of aging.”

In recent years, trade unions in Germany and other Northern European countries have called to emulate the Spanish model.

Anja Piel, an executive board member of a trade union representing six million German workers, told German media this week that employers should close offices with temperatures of over 95 degrees. “Employers have to reduce the burden,” Ms. Piel said.

10 Killed in India Landslide; 100 Trapped Under Rubble

By SAMEER YASIR and HARI KUMAR

NEW DELHI — A landslide triggered by torrential rains in the western Indian state of Maharashtra killed at least 10 people late Wednesday night, with more than 100 feared trapped under debris, as rescue workers battled difficult terrain and heavy downpours searching for survivors.

On Thursday, rescuers struggled as they pulled corpses from homes at the site of the landslide, in Irshalwadi village, which is about 37 miles from Mumbai.

So far, about 80 people have been rescued. The village is home to at least 225 people, and the authorities said they were airlifting excavators to assist rescuers who trekked 1.5 miles from the nearest highway to reach the village. In some areas, the debris is 10 to 30 feet deep.

“We are prioritizing people still trapped beneath the rubble,” said Eknath Shinde, the chief minister of Maharashtra State, who arrived at the site on Thursday.

Heavy rainfall and flash flooding have been tearing through the west of the country, burying homes, knocking down trees, canceling trains and forcing regional authorities to shut schools.

India has been hit hard by extreme weather conditions in recent years, raising fears about the effects of climate change accelerating and bringing irreversible changes to weather patterns, scientists say.

This year, the monsoon season, which is when South Asia receives most of its annual rainfall and which runs between June and September, has caused large-scale devastation from states straddling the Himalayas to coastal states like Maharashtra.

The state of Maharashtra was put on alert by the India Meteorological Department on Thursday. In addition to closing schools, the recent deluge has halted the operation of more than 100 trains, as water flowed into stations and onto the tracks in many places.

Western India hasn't been

alone in contending with the aftermath of torrential rains. Record levels of monsoon rains in northern India have killed at least 130 people in the last 26 days, government officials have reported. Of those, 99 were killed in Himachal Pradesh alone, with five more deaths reported on Wednesday, according to Jagat Singh Negi, a state official.

Himachal Pradesh State has been the scene of large-scale death and destruction. Long stretches of road have been washed away, loosened earth from landslides has flowed into people's homes, and some areas are still waterlogged and experi-

Torrential monsoon rainfall continues to pummel the country.

encing gridlocked traffic.

On Wednesday, rising water from the Yamuna River reached the outer walls of the Taj Mahal in Agra and submerged an adjacent garden.

More than 100,000 people have been affected and nine people killed in floods this monsoon season in Assam, a northeastern state, and floodwater has also entered Kaziranga National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site, according to Bitupon Gagoi, an information officer from Guwahati, the state capital.

Since April, at least 747 people have been killed by flash floods, drowning, lightning and landslides, according to India's federal home ministry.

C.C. Patel, a senior officer for the Relief Department in Gujarat State, which borders Maharashtra, said that thousands of people from low-lying parts of his state had been evacuated to safer areas.

“More rains have taken place this year in a short period than in full monsoon season,” he said.