



**PRESS RELEASE**

For immediate release

## **New study calls for improvements in public health responses to heatwaves in Belgium and the Netherlands**

*BRUSSELS, 22 November* – As hot spells are set to become more frequent and intense in the future, well-functioning national heatwave plans are considered critical in order to improve adaptation to heat and heatwaves. Yet, a new study focused on Brussels and Amsterdam shows that a lot of room exists for improvement in the awareness and coordination of the plans.

The [study](#), conducted by a team of researchers from the University of Louvain (UCL) and published in the [International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health](#), provides recommendations for improving health preparedness and urgently highlights the need to increase awareness of the impact of heat on health among care organisations.

### **Weaknesses in heatwave plans in Belgium and the Netherlands**

The severe heatwave that hit Europe in 2003 and accounted for up to 80,000 deaths prompted many countries to implement heatwave plans which aimed at reducing the avoidable human health consequences of extreme heat events by providing warnings as well as improving communication between relevant stakeholders.

However, the research findings indicate that even though care organisations, including elderly care institutes and hospitals, are listed in the heat plans of both Belgium and the Netherlands, representatives from these bodies are not aware of the existence of the plans and consider heat a low priority.

*‘This mismatch between the intended and the actual familiarity with the national heatwave plans was one of the most striking findings to us. As these organisations have the closest contact with at-risk populations, the low awareness of the impact of heat among stakeholders working in care organisations should be urgently addressed’*, says Dr Joris van Loenhout, lead author of the study.

It also became apparent that certain risk groups for extreme heat, such as individuals with little social contact, and implementation at a local level are not sufficiently addressed by the plans:

*‘For example, in Belgium there is no governmental organisation responsible for homeless people, who can be considered a risk group as many have poorly controlled chronic diseases, respiratory diseases and mental illnesses, which renders them vulnerable’*, says van Loenhout.

According to the authors of the study, more emphasis should be given to the variety of risk groups for extreme heat and the organisational structures for their care.



In addition, the researchers stress that more clarity is needed regarding the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders within the national heatwave plans, as none of the intended actions are enforced by law and everything is voluntary.

### **Adverse effects largely preventable**

The authors interviewed key stakeholders that have an important role in either the development of the heatwave plans in Belgium and the Netherlands or their implementation in Brussels or Amsterdam.

### **The research highlights that while extreme heat events cannot be prevented, cooperation and preparation are key in mitigating the impacts:**

*‘Public health concerns regarding heat mortality and morbidity are likely to increase due to demographic change, urbanisation, and climate change, but the adverse effects of extreme heat are largely preventable’, says van Loenhout. ‘Disaster response strategies are most effective when populations, the health sector and public infrastructure are prepared. This gives the best chance to significantly reduce health-related mortality and morbidity.’*

The findings are part of the case study ‘Heat and health risk in European cities’ of the EU-funded research project [ENHANCE](#) aimed at developing novel multi-sector partnerships to enhance society’s resilience to catastrophic natural hazards.

**A book on the results of the project is publicly available for free on the ENHANCE website [www.enhanceproject.eu](http://www.enhanceproject.eu)**

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### **About ENHANCE**

**Participants:** The Netherlands (Coordinator), Italy, Austria, UK, Belgium, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Portugal, Romania, Iceland

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