What is a heat wave? Here's what it is, how it affects your body and how to stay safe.

Olivia Munson | USA TODAY

Excessive heat can strike at any time during the year, even if you live in places where temperatures over 100 degrees are considered the norm.

Sometimes, the weather can become unbearable. It can feel as if you've stepped into an oven whenever you walk outside. In cases of extreme heat, your body can react in adverse ways, including experiencing dehydration or, worse, heat stroke, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Throughout history, heat waves have struck various parts of the U.S. from coast-to-coast. The summer of 1936 is one of the hottest on record and impacted the country when air conditioning was not a staple in average homes, according to the National Weather Service. Around 5,000 Americans died from the extreme heat, said the NWS.

What is a heat wave?

A heat wave is a period of time when temperatures are well above average and much warmer than usual for that area and time of year, said Bianca Feldkircher, lead meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Phoenix.

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What causes a heat wave?

Heat waves are typically caused by "unusually strong, high pressure systems," said Feldkircher.

According to the Farmer's Almanac, air from atmospheric upper levels is pulled downward and is then compressed, causing increases in temperature. The longer this high pressure system stays, the hotter the area becomes.

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