

An adaptability limit to climate change due to heat stress

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Despite the uncertainty in future climate-change impacts, it is often assumed that humans would be able to adapt to any possible warming. Here we argue that heat stress imposes a robust upper limit to such adaptation. Peak heat stress, quantified by the wet-bulb temperature T_w , is surprisingly similar across diverse climates today. T_w never exceeds 31°C. Any exceedence of 35°C for extended periods should induce hyperthermia in humans and other mammals, as dissipation of metabolic heat becomes impossible. While this never happens now, it would begin to occur with global-mean warming of about 7°C, calling the habitability of some regions into question. With 11–12°C warming, such regions would spread to encompass the majority of the human population as currently distributed. Eventual warmings of 12°C are possible from fossil fuel burning. One implication is that recent estimates of the costs of unmitigated climate change are too low unless the range of possible warming can somehow be narrowed. Heat stress also may help explain trends in the mammalian fossil record.

climate impacts | global warming | mammalian physiology | paleoclimate

Recent studies have highlighted the possibility of large global warmings in the absence of strong mitigation measures, for example the possibility of over 7°C of warming this century alone (1). Warming will not stop in 2100 if emissions continue. Each doubling of carbon dioxide is expected to produce 1.9–4.5°C of warming at equilibrium, but this is poorly constrained on the high side (2, 3) and according to one new estimate has a 5% chance of exceeding 7.1°C per doubling (4). Because combustion of all available fossil fuels could produce 2.75 doublings of CO₂ by 2300 (5), even a 4.5°C sensitivity could eventually produce 12°C of warming. Degassing of various natural stores of methane and/or CO₂ in a warmer climate (6, 7, 8) could increase warming further. Thus while central estimates of business-as-usual warming by 2100 are 3–4°C, eventual warmings of 10°C are quite feasible and even 20°C is theoretically possible (9).

Such worst-case scenarios (along with possible surprise impacts) may be an important or even dominant factor in evaluating the risk of carbon emissions, analogous to situations in which people buy insurance (9). It is widely agreed that warmings of over 6°C would have disastrous consequences for humankind, but it is very hard to pin down rigorously what the consequences would be, let alone quantify their costs. Thresholds have been proposed for ice sheet and rainforest collapse, for example, but predicting the timing or societal impacts of such events is challenging (10). Economic costs of warming are generally extrapolated from present-day data, but this is clearly unsatisfactory for climates so different from any in human experience. Inability to specify consequences of very large warmings is therefore a hurdle to rational decision-making on climate mitigation.

We propose that a somewhat neglected aspect of global warming, the direct impact on humans and other mammals in the form of heat stress, may provide a climate impacts benchmark that is relatively well-constrained by physical laws. We find a tolerance limit that is well above other oft-cited thresholds, such as the 2°C target now adopted by many nations, but still reachable if things go badly, therefore an important linchpin for risk estimates.

Heat stress is already a leading cause of fatalities from natural phenomena (11, 12). While fatalities appear associated with warm nights (13), hot days alter the lifestyles and work productivity of those living at low latitudes (14). Both impacts will clearly worsen in warmer climates (15, 16), but most believe humans will simply adapt, reasoning that humans already tolerate a very wide range of climates today. But when measured in terms of peak heat stress—including humidity—this turns out to be untrue. We show that even modest global warming could therefore expose large fractions of the population to unprecedented heat stress, and that with severe warming this would become intolerable.

A resting human body generates ~100 W of metabolic heat that (in addition to any absorbed solar heating) must be carried away via a combination of heat conduction, evaporative cooling, and net infrared radiative cooling. Net conductive and evaporative cooling can occur only if an object is warmer than the environmental wet-bulb temperature T_w , measured by covering a standard thermometer bulb with a wetted cloth and fully ventilating it. The second law of thermodynamics does not allow an object to lose heat to an environment whose T_w exceeds the object's temperature, no matter how wet or well-ventilated. Infrared radiation under conditions of interest here will usually produce a small additional heating; we err on the side of underestimating stress by neglecting this and assuming that solar heating will be avoided during peak heat stress.

While empirical heat indices such as “wet bulb globe temperature” (WBGT) are typically used to quantify heat stress, tolerance of a given index value varies significantly according to clothing, activity, and acclimatization (14). We consider T_w instead because, unlike other indices, it establishes a clear thermodynamic limit on heat transfer that cannot be overcome by such adaptations.

Humans maintain a core body temperature near 37°C that varies slightly among individuals but does not adapt to local climate. Human skin temperature is strongly regulated at 35°C or below under normal conditions, because the skin must be cooler than body core in order for metabolic heat to be conducted to the skin (17). Sustained skin temperatures above 35°C imply elevated core body temperatures (hyperthermia), which reach lethal values (42–43°C) for skin temperatures of 37–38°C even for acclimated and fit individuals (18, 19, 20, 21). We would thus expect sufficiently long periods of $T_w > 35°C$ to be intolerable.

Results

Fig. 1A shows area-weighted histograms of three quantities estimated from recent observations over land areas (excluding high latitudes): near-surface air temperature T sampled at all

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detailed heat stress studies incorporating physiological response characteristics and adaptations would be necessary to investigate this.

If warmings of 10°C were really to occur in next three centuries, the area of land likely rendered uninhabitable by heat stress would dwarf that affected by rising sea level. Heat stress thus deserves more attention as a climate-change impact.

The onset of $T_{W\max} > 35^\circ\text{C}$ represents a well-defined reference point where devastating impacts on society seem assured even with adaptation efforts. This reference point constrains with assumptions now used in integrated assessment models. Warmings of 10°C and above already occur in these models for some realizations of the future (33). The damages caused by 10°C of warming are typically reckoned at 10–30% of world GDP (33, 34), roughly equivalent to a recession to economic conditions of roughly two decades earlier in time. While undesirable, this is hardly on par with a likely near-halving of habitable land, indicating that current assessments are underestimating the seriousness of climate change.

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Methods

The observational estimates of wet-bulb and dry-bulb temperature extremes were derived from six-hourly 2-meter temperature, humidity, and pressure data from the ERA-Interim dataset. Results from this dataset were corroborated by similar results from the NCEP-DOE reanalysis II dataset. Simulations of present-day and hot climates were performed using the NCAR (National Center for Atmospheric Research) Community Atmosphere Model with varying levels of carbon dioxide. Quantities were computed from the model using the same variables and formula as for the reanalysis data.

A more detailed explanation and justification of data and methods is given in the *SI Text*. Further discussions can also be found there to support claims as to the limits of tolerable heat stress.

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