THE WEEKLY EL NIÑO CARIBBEAN BRIEFING

Trusted and informed reporting for Caribbean preparedness

● ISSUE 06 ● EXTREME HEAT, HEALTH AND VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES ● 19 NOVEMBER 2026



TOO HOT TO IGNORE: EXTREME HEAT, HEALTH AND VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

High temperatures, humidity and warm nights can overwhelm the body's ability to cool, causing heat illness and worsening chronic conditions. Pregnant women, newborns and people without shade, safe water, cooling or healthcare face greater risks.

Extreme heat can also disrupt work, food supplies and health services. As climate change intensifies heat events, preparedness matters even in tropical regions accustomed to warm weather.

PAHO/WHO identifies heat illness, water insecurity and service disruption among potential consequences of the 2026–2027 El Niño. Following health ministers' endorsement of the Caribbean Action Plan on Health and Climate Change 2026–2031, the question is whether warnings and services reach those most at risk.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

A public warning to "stay cool" is not equally useful to everyone. A household with reliable electricity and shade can respond differently from a family in a hot, poorly ventilated dwelling, an isolated older adult or a street vendor working outside. Older people, children, pregnant women, people with disabilities or chronic conditions and outdoor workers need tailored protection. Who can act on it, and who cannot?

Heat is a silent killer, causing approximately 500,000 heat-related deaths worldwide each year (Zhao et al., 2021). In the Caribbean, heat-related mortality increased by 61.4%, reaching approximately 25,500 deaths during 2012–2021, compared with 15,800 during 1990–1999 (Gordon-Strachan, 2026). Many non-fatal heat-related health impacts go unreported, unrecorded or unquantified.

Practical responses exist: warning thresholds linked to outreach, cooler work hours, shade and rest breaks, reliable water, neighbourhood check-ins and climate-resilient health facilities. The strongest story tests who benefits, what is funded and whether measures work, not what is announced.

WHERE TO LOOK

- **Dutch-speaking Caribbean:** Do alerts reach outdoor workers, tourists and isolated households?
- **Eastern Caribbean:** Which CARICOM–PAHO heat protections are funded and operating?
- **Guyana:** Compare recorded heat with alerts and outreach to older residents.
- **Jamaica:** Verify heat-illness figures; check clinics' cooling, water and backup power.
- **Suriname:** Compare coastal and interior risks and warnings in community languages.
- **Trinidad and Tobago:** Do "Feels Like Index" alerts lead to water, shade, rest and adjusted hours?

WHAT TO READ

- Caribbean Climate Outlook Newsletter, Nov 2026–Jan 2027 — CIMH/CariCOF, 31 Oct 2026.
- Health Implications for September to November 2026 — CIMH/CARPHA/PAHO bulletin, Sept 2026.
- Caribbean Action Plan on Health and Climate Change 2026–2031 — PAHO/CARICOM, Sept 2026.
- State of the Climate Update for COP31 — WMO, 9 Nov 2026.

WHO TO TALK TO

- **The Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA),** https://carpha.org, postmaster@carpha.org
- **CIMH / CariCOF,** Seasonal interpretation and local thresholds; rcc@cimh.edu.bb
- **Dr. Karen Polson,** Advisor Climate Change and Health, Social and Environmental Determinants for Health Equity (DHE), PAHO/WHO, polsonkar@paho.org
- **Francisco Chesini,** International Consultant, DHE, PAHO/WHO, chesinifra@paho.org

QUESTIONS FOR JOURNALISTS

1. When does a heat warning trigger action? Request dated meteorological thresholds, messages, distribution channels and evidence that alerts reach people in accessible languages and formats.

2. Are heat-related illnesses being counted? Request anonymized emergency visits, admissions, occupational incidents and mortality definitions; ask clinicians about under-recording.

3. Are outdoor and informal workers protected? Examine water/rest/shade provisions, shift changes, inspections, pay protection and workers' experiences in agriculture, construction, markets and transport.

4. Is policy becoming practice? Against the 2026–2031 regional plan, follow national budgets, milestones, facility upgrades, public consultations and measurable health outcomes.

ACCURACY CHECK

- Air temperature, heat index and occupational heat-stress measures differ; report correct units.
- No individual illness, death or outbreak should be attributed to El Niño without appropriate evidence.
- Do not conflate El Niño with long-term climate change or treat all Caribbean territories alike.
- A plan, training or facility upgrade is not proof of functioning protection or improved outcomes.

SOME QUICK TERMS

- **Heatwave:** Period of extreme high temperature lasting several days that can be responsible for large number of weather-related deaths and diseases(Kovats and Ebi, 2006); no global definition exists.

- **Heat index ("feels like"):** An estimate of how hot it feels when air temperature and humidity combine; not the same as measured air temperature.

- **Heat exhaustion / heatstroke:** Heat exhaustion is potentially serious overheating; heatstroke is a medical emergency requiring immediate assistance.

REPORTING SUPPORT AND RECOGNITION

Each week, UNESCO supports reporting costs of a selected Caribbean story with up to US$500. Send your pitch by **24 November 2026** to UNESCO x El Niño 2026-2027 Story Pitch (click the link).

The **Caribbean Broadcasting Union (CBU)** is also launching five awards in a new El Niño category at the **2027 Caribbean Media Awards**.

Coming next: *Keeping Communities Connected: Broadcasting, Communication and Disaster Readiness.*