

# PATIENTS IN DANGER



The Enquirer/Gary Landers

**Sr. Phyllis Kemper**, a visiting nurse with the TriHealth Parish Nurse program, works to help elderly and ailing residents contend with summer heat.

## Visiting nurse offers relief from the heat

### About Sister Kemper

Sister Phyllis Kemper, a TriHealth Parish nurse who visits patients in Over-the-Rhine, West End and North Fairmount, is based at St. Francis Seraph Parish in Over-the-Rhine. She works extensively with the parish's emergency outreach center and charitable missions. For information on making a donation, call 513-535-2719.

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Vermell Perkins hits the road when it gets really hot in her Vine Street house.

She has a few hangouts in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood – the St. Francis Seraph Outreach Center, the senior center and others – that she knows are air-conditioned, and she'll spend a few hours there.

"I get up and go everywhere some day so I don't have to come home and run the air-conditioner until after 5," she said.

Perkins, 77, has a window air-conditioner, but she can't afford to run it all day. She also has high blood pressure,

and she's a two-time cancer survivor, so the heat isn't any better for her health than her wallet.

Summer is uncomfortable for most adults. For the elderly and people with chronic illnesses, it's downright dangerous, experts say.

"If you're in a room without air-conditioning or good air circulation and you have a heart or lung condition, just getting up to go to the bathroom can be as big an exertion as a younger person going for a two- or three-mile run," said Jeffrey Schlaudecker, a geriatrician at the University of Cincinnati and Christ Hospital.

If she has to be home during the



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**Sr. Phyllis Kemper**, a visiting nurse with the TriHealth Parish Nurse program, talks with patient Donald Varner in his home on Republic Street in Over-the-Rhine. She got him a window air-conditioner for his upstairs bedroom.

# Nurse: Helps patients find relief

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heat of the day, Perkins said, "I just sit quietly and don't move much."

Donald Varner felt as if he couldn't breathe in his Republic Street home until Sister Phyllis Kemper, a visiting nurse with TriHealth's Parish Nurse program, got him a window air-conditioner for his upstairs bedroom.

Varner, 59, has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and kidney cancer. He's on oxygen so he can breathe better, but when temperatures start to climb, it doesn't help much.

Kemper and her helper, UC medical student Brent Wagner, visit him once a week to check up on him.

"She's been calling and asking me, 'You're not going out in this heat, are you?'"

Varner says.

He tries to walk every day. In the summer, he heads out early in the morning or after 7.

"I have to build up my muscles and my lungs," he says. "I wish it would rain. I can go out and walk in it and it feels so good."

He has a doctor's appointment this week for an update on his cancer status, he tells Kemper.

Kemper, who's been a parish nurse for 10 years, has patients all over Over-the-Rhine and West End. Some are battling serious illnesses, like Varner. Some are expectant moms at risk for having a premature infant.

All of them are poor.

During her visits, she does what nurses do - she checks patients' blood pres-

sure, listens to their breathing, asks them how they're feeling.

Sometimes, she helps patients organize their prescriptions so they know what pill to take when.

Sometimes, she drives them to their doctor appointments, or helps them find new housing that better suits their needs.

When it's this hot, she spends a lot of time reminding her patients to get extra fluid and to open the window or turn on the air-conditioning, if they have it.

"I have one guy who lives on the first floor and he used to have an air-conditioner, but someone stole it," Kemper says. "I have to get him a new one, but first I have to find one of those window guards for it."

Sometimes older people

just don't feel the heat, Schlaudecker says, and sometimes they don't understand how dangerous it can be for their health.

Sometimes, they're confused by conflicting advice. Whenever a heat emergency is issued, the message is to get more fluids.

But people with congestive heart failure and kidney disease are supposed to limit their fluids, and they often take diuretics, or water pills.

"It really is very complicated," Schlaudecker says.

He usually advises his patients to increase their fluids slightly and to monitor their weight and urine output.

If either goes up or down a lot, he says, call the doctor.

"But don't stop taking your meds," he adds.