

Heat Related Health Problems

Are you ready for extreme heat???

Heat can affect anyone. It is most likely to affect young children, elderly people, and people with health problems. For instance, people with a medical condition that causes poor blood circulation, and those who take medications to get rid of water from the body (diuretics) or for certain skin conditions, may be more susceptible to heat sickness than others. It is important for everyone to be prepared for heat emergencies.

Heat wave is a prolonged period of excessive heat and humidity. The National Weather Service steps up its procedures to alert the public during these periods of excessive heat. Heat wave can result in three main heat emergencies: heat cramps, heat exhaustion, and heat stroke (also referred to as sunstroke.)

Heat Cramps are muscular pains and spasms due to heavy exertion. They usually involve the abdominal muscles or legs. It is generally thought that the loss of water from heavy sweating causes the cramps. To treat heat cramps, get the person to a cooler place and have him or her rest in a comfortable position. Lightly stretch the affected muscle and replenish fluids. Give the person a half glass of cool water every fifteen minutes. Do not give liquids with alcohol or caffeine in them, as they can make conditions worse.

Heat Exhaustion typically occurs when people exercise heavily or work in a warm humid place where body fluids are lost through heavy sweating. Blood flow to the skin increases, causing blood flow to decrease to the vital organs. This results in a form of mild shock. The skin will be cool and moist, and could appear to be either pale or flushed. The victim may have a headache and/or be suffering from nausea. There may also be some dizziness. It is important to treat the victim promptly so that the condition will not intensify and become heat stroke. Begin treatment by getting the person out of the heat and into a cooler place. Remove or loosen tight clothing and apply cool, wet cloths, such as towels or sheets. If the person is conscious, give cool water to drink, a half glass every fifteen minutes, and make sure the person drinks slowly. Again, do not give liquids that contain alcohol or caffeine. Let the victim rest in a comfortable position, and watch carefully for changes in his or her condition.

Heat stroke is the most serious heat emergency. It is life threatening. The victim's temperature control system, which produces sweating to cool the body, stops working. The body temperature can rise so high that brain damage and death may result if the body is not cooled quickly. Here are some signs that a person is having a heat stroke: hot, red skin; changes in

consciousness; rapid, weak pulse and rapid, shallow breathing. Body temperature can be very high- sometimes as high as 105F. If the person was sweating from heavy work or exercise, skin may be wet; otherwise, it will feel dry. A person suffering from heat stroke needs help fast. Call 911 and move the person to a cooler place immediately. Immerse the victim in a cool bath or wrap wet sheets around the body and fan it. Watch for signals of breathing problems. Keep the person lying down and continue to cool the body any way you can. If the victim refuses water, is vomiting, or there are changes in the level of consciousness, do not give anything to eat or drink.

These are very serious conditions. Now that you know what can happen, here are some ways that you can protect yourself and your family from heat emergencies:

If a Heat Wave is Predicted or Happening...

- Slow down. Avoid strenuous activity. If you must do strenuous activity, do it during the coolest part of the day, which is usually in the morning between 4am and 7am.
- Stay indoors as much as possible. If air conditioning is not available, stay on the lowest floor, out of the sunshine.
- Wear lightweight, light-colored clothing to reflect away some of the sun's energy.
- Drink plenty of water regularly and often.
- Drink plenty of fluids even if you do not feel thirsty.
- Water is the safest liquid to drink during heat emergencies. Avoid drinks with alcohol or caffeine in them. They can make you feel good briefly, but make the heat's effects on your body worse. This is especially true about beer, which actually dehydrates the body.
- Eat small meals and eat more often. Avoid foods that are high in protein, which increase metabolic heat.
- Avoid using salt tablets unless directed to do so by a physician.