

HEAT ILLNESS

Heat-related deaths and illness are preventable yet more people in this country die from extreme heat than from hurricanes, lightning, tornadoes, floods, and earthquakes combined.

People suffer heat-related illness when the body's temperature control system is overloaded. Conditions that can limit the ability to regulate temperature include: old age, youth (age 0-4), obesity, fever, dehydration, heart disease, mental illness, poor circulation, sunburn, certain medications (such as for depression, insomnia, or poor circulation) and alcohol use. Healthy individuals can succumb to heat if they participate in strenuous physical activities during hot weather, especially when the humidity is high.

Heat illness ranges from sunburn, heat rash, and heat cramps to heat exhaustion and heat stroke.

Heat stroke occurs when the body becomes unable to control its temperature: the sweating mechanism fails and the body's temperature rises rapidly. As a result, heat stroke can cause severe and permanent damage to vital organs. Signs of heat stroke include: high body temperature; red, hot, and dry skin (no sweating); dizziness; headache; nausea; confusion; unconsciousness.

Heat exhaustion is a milder form of heat-related illness that can develop after several days of exposure to high temperatures and inadequate or unbalanced replacement of fluids. Signs of heat exhaustion include: muscle cramps, weakness, dizziness, headache, nausea, fainting.

Heat cramps are muscle pains or spasms that may occur in association with strenuous activity. Sweating depletes the body's salt and moisture. The low salt level in the muscles causes painful cramps. Heat cramps may also be a symptom of heat exhaustion.

Heat rash is a skin irritation caused by excessive sweating during hot, humid weather. Heat rash looks like a red cluster of pimples or small blisters.

Tips for Preventing Heat-Related Illness

The best defense against excessive heat is prevention. Even a few hours a day in air conditioning can greatly reduce the risk. Use common sense. NEVER leave anyone in a closed, parked vehicle. Drink plenty of fluid, replace salts and minerals, wear appropriate clothing and sunscreen, pace yourself, stay cool indoors, schedule outdoor activities carefully, use a buddy system, monitor those at risk, and adjust to the environment. Allow several days to become acclimated before strenuous activity in the heat.

Drink more fluids regardless of your activity level. Don't wait until you're thirsty to drink. Don't drink liquids that contain caffeine or alcohol as these actually cause you to lose more body fluid. Also, avoid very cold drinks, because they can cause stomach cramps. Heavy sweating removes necessary salts and minerals from the body and must be replaced. Drink fruit juice or a sports beverage when you exercise or work in the heat. Avoid hot foods and heavy meals—they add heat to your body.

If exertion in the heat makes your heart pound and leaves you gasping for breath, STOP all activity. Get into a cool area or at least in the shade, and rest, especially if you become lightheaded, confused, weak, or faint. When working in the heat, monitor your co-workers and have someone do the same for you. Heat-induced illness can cause a person to become confused or even lose consciousness.

Choose lightweight, light-colored, loose-fitting clothing. Sunburn affects your body's ability to cool itself and causes a loss of body fluid. Protect yourself from the sun by wearing a wide-brimmed hat (also keeps you cooler) along with sunglasses, and sunscreen of SPF 15 or higher.

For additional information on this and other health issues, visit: MedlinePlus.gov