

keeping cool isn't just about comfort



The Louisiana summer season is filled with long-anticipated sunny days overflowing with outdoor activities and great adventures just waiting to happen. Besides amusement and family fun, those hot days, unfortunately, also hold the promise of high humidity and the possibility of heat-related emergencies.

Just like residents make preparations for the six months of hurricane season, it would behoove the general public to take similar steps to avoid the ills associated with soaring temperatures. In a modern, air-conditioned house, keeping cool is simply a matter of dialing the thermostat down. Outdoors or in an older home without air conditioning, it's not so easy.

The healthy human body has a mechanism (sweating) that under normal conditions compensates for rises in environmental temperature by transferring heat to keep the body temperature within a safe range. Sweating reduces body temperature as the sweat evaporates. During periods of heat and humidity, the excess moisture in the air interferes with the evaporation process. When the sweating mechanism is not enough to cool the body, internal temperatures tend to rise.

Hyperthermia, a high body temperature, can develop very quickly in exceptionally hot settings. Poorly ventilated spaces where heat is allowed to climb without an adequate means of escape, such as attics, can also wreak havoc on the body's thermostat. An example of this would be a child confined in a hot automobile with the windows rolled up or slightly cracked. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), interior automobile temperatures can quickly rise by nearly 20°F in just the first 10 minutes of summer heat.

Heat-related illnesses vary in severity from a simple heat rash to heatstroke, a true medical emergency. By and large, the youngest and the oldest age groups are most at risk. Some other factors that increase the risk include dehydration, which can be made worse by caffeine or alcohol consumption, being overweight, poor circulation, heart disease, mental illness, diabetes, chronic illnesses, sunburn and certain prescription drugs.

Most budding athletes are familiar with heat cramps—muscle pains or spasms most often of the arms, legs or abdomen—which sometimes occur with intense exercise. During physical exercise, sweating begins, which cools the body, but also causes essential water and electrolyte loss, causing cramps.

Heat exhaustion can occur when a person is working or exercising in high temperatures and fails to replenish the body's supply of fluids and minerals. Warning signs include muscle cramps, nausea and/or vomiting, dizziness, weakness, heavy sweating, headache, pale color, weak pulse and fainting.

When the body is overwhelmed and unable to regulate its temperature, heat stroke occurs as evidenced by hot, dry skin, rising body temperature (103°F or greater), rapid and weak pulse, dizziness, throbbing headache, confusion and possible loss of consciousness. This is a medical emergency and the emergency medical system (EMS) should be called for assistance. While waiting for help, get the person to a cooler area.

The American Red Cross offers these heat-related illness prevention tips:

- Dress for the heat. Wear lightweight, light-colored clothing. Wear a hat or use an umbrella.
- Drink water. Carry water or juice with you and drink continuously even if you don't feel thirsty. Avoid alcohol and caffeine.
- Eat small meals and eat more often. Avoid high protein foods which increase metabolic heat.
- Avoid using salt tablets unless directed to do so by a physician.
- Slow down. Avoid strenuous activity or if you must do strenuous activity, do it during the coolest part of the day (usually in the morning between 4:00 a.m. and 7:00 a.m.). Follow safety precautions.
- Stay indoors when possible.
- Take regular breaks when engaged in physical activity on warm days. Take time out to find a cool place.

To increase your chances of having a memorable summer, remember to apply your sunscreen about 30 minutes before you go outside and reapply according to package directions. And everywhere you go, bring your common sense with you – if the heat is intolerable, stay indoors or in a cool place. See www.redcross.org for additional tips. Discuss your personal healthcare needs with your physician. For information on children's needs, visit www.aap.org

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HEAT CRAMPS OR HEAT EXHAUSTION

- Get the victim to a cooler place
- Have the person rest in a comfortable position
- If fully alert, give sips of water 1½ glass every 15 minutes (if nausea occurs, discontinue)
- Remove or loosen clothing and apply cool, wet cloths such as towels or sheets
- If the person refuses water, vomits or loses consciousness, call 9-1-1 for attention.

FOR HEAT STROKE – DIAL 9-1-1

- Move the person to a cooler place
- Quickly, cool the body. Wrap wet sheets around the body and fan it. If you have ice packs or cold packs, wrap them in a cloth and place them on the victim's wrists and ankles, armpits and neck.
- Keep the person lying down
- Watch for signs of breathing problems and make sure the airway is clear.
- Do not give fluids