

Staying healthy in the heat by Mike DeCinti

Last Friday marked the Summer solstice (the longest day of the year) and the official start to the Summer Season. And if temperatures this summer are anything like we've experienced over the last few weeks, it's going to be a hot one. Of course with high temperatures come concerns about our health and exposure to the heat and sun.

Unusually hot weather conditions affect the body by pushing it beyond its limits. When temperatures and humidity are high, the body must work extra hard to maintain a normal temperature. Most heat disorders occur because people have been overexposed to heat or have over-exercised for their age and physical condition. During a heat wave, everyone is at risk, but some groups are more vulnerable than others including: Seniors; Infants and young children; People on dialysis or with diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and respiratory diseases; People who play sports or exercise vigorously outdoors; People who do strenuous outdoor work for long periods of time; Pregnant women; and people who are overweight.

Obviously, there's no way you can completely isolate yourself from the sun and of course if you fall into one of the categories listed above the only thing you can do is to be aware of the heat's effect on your body, including heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke.

Heat cramps are painful spasms usually in the leg and stomach muscles and are usually accompanied by heavy sweating. If you experience a cramp you should get out of the heat, massage the area cramping and drink some water.

During heat exhaustion, a person may be sweating heavily but their skin may be cool, pale or flushed. Other symptoms are a weak pulse, fainting, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, exhaustion and headaches. People suffering from heat exhaustion should lie down in a cool place, loosen or remove clothing and put on cool wet clothes or towels. You should drink water slowly but discontinued if nauseated, and you should get immediate medical attention if vomiting continues.

Heat stroke is a severe medical emergency that can result in death. Body temperature is as high as 103° F (opposed to normal body temperature of 98.5° F) pulse is strong and rapid, and breathing is shallow and rapid. The person suffering heat stroke may be experiencing throbbing headache, dizziness, nausea, confusion, have red, hot and dry skin (not sweating), and may become unconscious. This person should be taken to a hospital as quickly as possible. Delay can be fatal. If possible, on the way to the hospital, keep the person cool by removing clothing and sponging with cool water.

During periods of extreme heat, try to follow these precautions.

- Try and plan your day in a way that allows you to stay out of the heat.
- If you must be outdoors during hot weather, try to limit your activity to morning and evening.

- If you must go out, stay in the shade, wear a wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses and light, loose-fitting clothing.
- Stay cool indoors, take cool showers often or wet your hands, face and the back of your neck.
- If you don't have air conditioning, spend part of the day in an air-conditioned place such as a shopping mall, library, or friend's house.
- Never leave infants, children or pets unattended in a parked car.

Drink plenty of water and *natural* fruit juices. Don't wait until you are thirsty to drink. If you do heavy physical activity during hot weather, drink two to four glasses of cool liquids per hour. Don't drink liquids that contain alcohol, caffeine or large amounts of sugar. They may actually cause your body to lose more fluid. Also avoid very cold drinks because they may cause stomach cramps. Heavy sweating causes your body to lose salt and minerals. These must be replaced by drinking cool drinks or sports beverages. However, if you have epilepsy, heart disease, liver or kidney disease, or if you are on a fluid-restricted diet, consult your doctor before increasing your fluid intake.

During heat emergencies, it is important to keep a lookout for the most vulnerable in your community. Check regularly on family, friends or neighbors who are at higher risk of heat-related illnesses and who do not have air conditioning to see that they are all right. And of course in an emergency call 911.

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