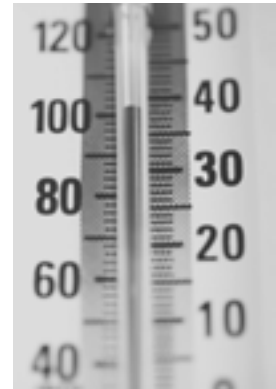


Extreme Heat and Aging

Summertime in Arkansas often brings extreme heat and high humidity—a potentially dangerous combination. People suffer heat-related illness when their bodies are unable to compensate and properly cool themselves. Very high body temperatures may damage the brain or other vital organs.

When the humidity is high, sweat will not evaporate as quickly, preventing the body from releasing heat quickly. Other conditions that can limit the ability to regulate temperature include old age, youth (ages zero to four), obesity, fever, dehydration, heart disease, mental illness, poor circulation, sunburn and prescription drug and alcohol use. Be sure to **check on friends and loved ones** who meet these criteria.

Summertime activity, whether on the playing field or on the job, must be balanced with measures that aid the body's cooling mechanisms and prevent heat-related illness.



What Is Hyperthermia?

Hyperthermia is heat-related illness, and senior adults are at particular risk of hyperthermia. There are levels of heat-related illness, as follows:

Heat stress occurs when a strain is placed on the body as a result of hot weather.

Heat fatigue is a feeling of weakness brought on by high outdoor temperature.

Heat syncope is sudden dizziness after exercising in the heat.

Heat cramps are painful muscle spasms in the abdomen, arms, or legs after strenuous activity. Heat cramps often are caused by a lack of salt in the body. People on salt-restricted diets may be at increased risk. However, do not use salt pills without first asking your health care provider.

Heat exhaustion is a warning that the body is getting too hot and is often caused by the body's loss of water and salt. The individual may be thirsty, giddy, weak, uncoordinated, nauseous and sweating a lot.

Heat stroke is life threatening; body temperature rises above 104° F. Symptoms may include confusion; bizarre behavior; fainting; staggering; strong, rapid pulse; dry, flushed skin; lack of sweating; possible delirium; or coma. Heatstroke may damage the kidneys, heart, lungs, muscles, liver, intestines and brain. Emergency medical treatment is necessary; **call 911 immediately.**

What Are the Increased Risks for the Elderly?

The following factors may increase older individuals' risk of heat illness:

- Being very overweight or underweight.
- Drinking alcoholic beverages.
- Having heart, lung, kidney disease or other illness that causes general weakness or fever.
- Having high blood pressure or other conditions that require changes in diet.
- Living in homes without fans or air conditioners.

- Having poor circulation, inefficient sweat glands and changes in the skin caused by the normal aging process.
- Not staying indoors on very hot and humid days, particularly when an air-pollution alert is in effect.
- Overdressing or wearing the wrong kinds of fabrics for hot weather.
- Taking medicines such as diuretics, sedatives, tranquilizers and certain heart and blood pressure drugs that may decrease your body's ability to cool itself through perspiration.
- Taking several drugs for various conditions. (Do not, however, stop taking prescribed medicine until you talk with your health care provider.)

How Can You Protect Yourself From the Heat?

The best defense is prevention. Here are some tips:

Avoid very cold drinks because they can cause stomach cramps.

Be aware that electric fans will not prevent heat-related illness when the temperature is in the high 90s. (Taking a cool shower or bath or going to an air-conditioned place is much better.)

Don't drink liquids that contain caffeine, alcohol or large amounts of sugar. (These actually cause you to lose more body fluid.)

Drink more fluids (nonalcoholic), regardless of your activity level. Don't wait until you're thirsty to drink. (**Warning:** If your doctor generally limits your fluid intake or has you on water pills, ask him/her how much you should drink while the weather is hot.)

Stay indoors and, if at all possible, stay in an air-conditioned place—such as a shopping mall, public library, or heat-relief shelter (call your local health department or County Extension Office for locations). Even a few hours spent in air conditioning can help your body stay cooler when you go back into the heat.

What Can You Do if You Must Be Out in the Heat?

If you must be out in the heat, be sure to take the following precautions:

Cut down on exercise.

Drink two to four glasses of cool, nonalcoholic fluids each hour if you must exercise. (A sports beverage can replace the salt and minerals you lose in sweat. **Warning:** If you are on a low-salt diet, talk with your doctor before drinking sports beverages.)

Limit your outdoor activity to morning and evening hours.

NEVER leave anyone in a closed, parked vehicle.

Protect yourself from the sun. Wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses and use sunscreen of SPF 15 or higher. (The most effective products say "broad spectrum" or UVA/UVB protection" on the labels.)

Take rest breaks often in shady areas.

Remember to balance your summertime activities with measures that aid the body's cooling mechanisms and prevent heat-related illness. Enjoy your summer!

References: http://www.fairview.org/healthlibrary/content/sha_hyperold_sha.htm
<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/extremeheat/faq.asp>
http://www.arfamilies.org/health_nutrition/topics/extreme_heat.htm

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