



Frequently asked questions about Hot Weather Health Emergencies

From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

Even short periods of high temperatures can cause serious health problems. Common summertime problems include: **heat exhaustion, heat stroke, heat cramps, sunburn and heat rash**

What is Heat Exhaustion?

Heat exhaustion is the body's response to an excessive loss of the water and salt contained in sweat. Those most prone to heat exhaustion are elderly people, people with high blood pressure, and people working or exercising in a hot environment.

How to Recognize Heat Exhaustion?

Warning signs of heat exhaustion include:

- heavy sweating
- paleness
- muscle cramps
- tiredness
- weakness
- dizziness
- headache
- nausea or vomiting
- fainting

The skin may be cool and moist. The victim's pulse rate will be fast and weak, and breathing will be fast and shallow. If heat exhaustion is untreated it may progress to heat stroke. Seek medical attention immediately if:

- symptoms are severe, or
- the victim has heart problems or high blood pressure.

Otherwise, help the victim to cool off, and seek medical attention if symptoms worsen or last longer than 1 hour.

What to Do if You Think its Health Exhaustion?

Cooling measures that may be effective include:

- cool, non-alcoholic beverages, as directed by your physician
- rest
- cool shower, bath, or sponge bath
- an air-conditioned environment
- lightweight clothing

What is Heat Stroke?

Heat stroke occurs when the body becomes unable to control its temperature: the body's temperature rises rapidly, the sweating mechanism fails, and the body is unable to cool down. Body temperature may rise to 106 degrees Fahrenheit or higher within 10-15 minutes. Heat stroke can cause death or permanent disability if emergency treatment is not given.

How to Recognize Heat Stroke?

Warning signs of heat stroke vary but may include:

- an extremely high body temperature (above 103 degrees Fahrenheit, orally)
- red, hot, and dry skin (no sweating)
- rapid, strong pulse
- throbbing headache
- dizziness
- nausea
- confusion
- unconsciousness

What to do if You Think it's Heat Stroke?

If you see any of these signs, you may be dealing with a life threatening emergency. Have someone call for immediate medical assistance while you begin cooling the victim:

- Get the victim to a shady area.
- Cool the victim rapidly using whatever methods you can. For example, immerse the victim in a tub of cool water; place in a cool shower; spray with cool water from a garden hose; sponge with cool water; or if the humidity is low, wrap the victim in a cool, wet sheet and fan him or her vigorously.
- Monitor body temperature and continue cooling efforts until the body temperature drops to 101-102 degrees Fahrenheit.
- If emergency medical personnel are delayed, call the hospital emergency room for further instructions.
- Do not give the victim alcohol to drink.
- Get medical assistance as soon as possible.

Sometimes a victim's muscles will begin to twitch uncontrollably as a result of heat stroke. If this happens, keep the victim from injuring himself, but do not place any object in the mouth and do not give fluids. If there is vomiting, make sure the airway remains open by turning the victim on his or her side.

What are Heat Cramps?

Heat cramps usually affect people who sweat a lot during strenuous activity. This 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.

How to Recognize Heat Cramps?

Heat cramps are muscle pains or spasms -- usually in the abdomen, arms, or legs -- that may occur in association with strenuous activity. If you have heart problems or are on a low sodium diet, get medical attention for heat cramps.

What to Do if You Think its Heat Cramps?

If medical attention is not necessary, take these steps:

- Stop all activity, and sit quietly in a cool place.
- Drink clear juice or a sports beverage.
- Do not return to strenuous activity for a few hours after the cramps subside because further exertion may lead to heat exhaustion or heat stroke.
- Seek medical attention for heat cramps if they do not subside in 1 hour.

What is Sunburn?

Sunburn should be avoided because it is damaging to the skin. Although the discomfort is usually minor and healing often occurs in about a week, a more severe sunburn may require medical attention.

How to Recognize Sunburn?

Symptoms of sunburn are well known: skin becomes red, painful, and abnormally warm after sun exposure.

What to Do if You Think its Sunburn?

Consult a doctor if the sunburn affects an infant under 1 year of age or if these symptoms are present:

- fever
- fluid-filled blisters
- severe pain

Also, remember these tips when treating sunburn:

- Avoid repeated sun exposure.
- Apply cold compresses or immerse the sunburned area in cool water.
- Apply moisturizing lotion to affected areas. Do not use salve, butter, or ointment.
- Do not break blisters.

What is Heat Rash?

Heat rash is a skin irritation caused by excessive sweating during hot, humid weather. It can occur at any age but is most common in young children.

How to Recognize Heat Rash?

Heat rash looks like a red cluster of pimples or small blisters. It is more likely to occur on the neck and upper chest, in the groin, under the breasts, and in elbow creases.

What to Do if You Think it's Heat Rash

The best treatment for heat rash is to provide a cooler, less humid environment. Keep the affected area dry. Dusting powder may be used to increase comfort, but avoid using ointments or creams -- they keep the skin warm and moist and may make the condition worse.

Treating heat rash is simple and usually does not require medical assistance. Other heat-related problems can be much more severe.

One last hot tip...

These self-help measures are not a substitute for medical care but may help you recognize and respond promptly to warning signs of trouble. Your best defense against heat-related illness is prevention. Staying cool and making simple changes in your fluid intake, activities, and clothing during hot weather can help you to remain safe and healthy.

**For more information about personal health care and other important health information,
visit us on the web:**

www.bhsj.org

Or call your local Health Department office at:

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517-279-9561 x 144

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517-437-7395 x 110

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