

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hot Weather Health Emergencies

The heat wave we are currently experiencing may continue for awhile as a National Weather service forecaster indicates a 'heat dome' has settled over the mid-west. Because summer heat waves can bring unusually high temperatures that may last for days or weeks, the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency is advising community residents to use caution when outdoors during these dog days of summer.

Several factors affect the body's ability to cool itself during extremely hot weather. Normally, the body cools itself by sweating. But under some conditions, sweating just isn't enough. When the humidity is high, sweat will not evaporate as quickly, preventing the body from releasing heat quickly. Very high body temperatures may damage the brain or other vital organs. Conditions that can limit the ability to regulate temperature include old age, obesity, fever, dehydration, heart disease, poor circulation, sunburn, and drug and alcohol use.

According to Steve Todd, Health Officer for the tri-county agency, "People must be careful to avoid hot weather health emergencies during these long, hot, sticky days. Heat cramps, which can be caused by loss of salt from heavy sweating, can easily turn into heat exhaustion. Heat exhaustion, which is caused by allowing oneself to become dehydrated, can quickly progress to heatstroke. And heatstroke, if left unchecked, can lead to shock, potential brain damage, organ failure, and even death."

To protect your health and those you love when temperatures are extremely high, remember follow these tips:

- **Drink Plenty of Fluid.** Increasing your fluid intake during hot weather spell will help your body to stay cool. During hot weather, you will need to drink more liquid than your thirst indicates. This is especially true for persons 65 years of age and older who often

have a decreased ability to respond to external temperature changes. Drinking plenty of liquids during exercise is especially important. However, avoid very cold beverages because they can cause stomach cramps. In addition, avoid drinks containing alcohol or caffeine because they will actually cause you to dehydrate. (Caution: If your doctor has prescribed a fluid-restricted diet or diuretics for you, ask your doctor how much you should drink.)

- **Replace Salt and Minerals.** Heavy sweating removes salt and minerals from the body. These are necessary for your body and must be replaced. The easiest and safest way to replace salt and minerals is through your diet. Drink fruit juice or a sports beverage during exercise or any work in the heat. Do not take salt tablets unless directed by your doctor. If you are on a low-salt diet, ask your doctor before changing what you eat or drink -- especially before drinking a sports beverage.
- **Wear Appropriate Clothing and Sunscreen.** Choose lightweight, light-colored, loose-fitting clothing. In the hot sun, a wide-brimmed hat will provide shade and keep the head cool. Sunburn affects your body's ability to cool itself and causes a loss of body fluids. A variety of sunscreens are available to reduce the risk of sunburn. Check the sun protection factor (SPF) number on the label of the sunscreen container. Select SPF 15 or higher to protect yourself adequately. Apply sunscreen 30 minutes before going outdoors and reapply according to package directions.
- **Pace yourself if you are not used to working in a hot environment.** If you must work faster, pick up the pace gradually. 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.
- **Stay Cool Indoors.** The most efficient way to beat the heat is to stay in an air-conditioned area. If you do not have an air conditioner or evaporative cooling unit, consider a visit to a shopping mall or public library for a few hours. Electric fans may be useful to increase comfort and to draw cool air into your home at night, but do not rely on a fan as your primary cooling device during a heat wave. When the temperature is in the high 90's or higher, a fan will not prevent heat-related illness. A cool shower or bath is a more effective way to cool off. Also, use your stove and oven less to maintain a cooler temperature your home.

- **Schedule Outdoor Activities Carefully.** If you must be out in the heat, try to plan your activities so that you are outdoors either before noon or in the evening. While outdoors, rest frequently in a shady area. Resting periodically will give your body's thermostat a chance to recover.
- **Use a Buddy System.** When working in the heat, monitor the condition of your co-workers and have someone do the same for you. Heat-induced illness can cause a person to become confused or lose consciousness. If you are 65 years of age or older, have a friend or relative call to check on you twice a day during a heat wave. If you know anyone in this age group, check on them at least twice a day.
- **Monitor those at High Risk for Hot Weather Health Emergencies.** Those at greatest risk of heat-related illness include:
 - infants and children up to four years of age
 - people 65 years of age or older
 - people who are overweight
 - people who overexert during work or exercise
 - people who are ill or on certain medications

Infants and children up to four years of age are sensitive to the effects of high temperatures and rely on others to regulate their environments and provide adequate liquids. People 65 years of age or older may not compensate for heat stress efficiently, and are less likely to sense and respond to changes in temperature. Overweight people may be prone to heat sickness because of their tendency to retain more body heat. Any health condition that causes dehydration makes the body more susceptible to heat sickness. If you or someone you know is at higher risk, it is important to drink plenty of fluids; avoid overexertion; and get your doctor or pharmacist's advice about medications taken for high blood pressure, depression, nervousness, mental illness, insomnia, or poor circulation.

- **Adjust to the Environment.** Be aware that any sudden change in temperature, such as a summer heat wave, will be stressful to your body. You will have a greater tolerance for the heat if you limit your physical activity, until you become accustomed to the heat.

If traveling to a hotter climate, allow several days to become acclimated before attempting any vigorous exercise, and work up to it gradually.

- **Use Common Sense.** Avoid hot foods and heavy meals -- they add heat to your body. Do not leave infants or pets in a parked car. Dress infants in cool, loose clothing and monitor fluid intake. And remember your pet will feel the affects of the heat as well. Be sure to give your pet plenty of fresh water, and leave the water in a shady area.

To better assist you, the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency has posted a new **Hot Weather Health Emergencies Frequently Asked Questions** flyer on its website to help you identify symptoms for heat rash, heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Check it out by going to www.bhsj.org and clicking on Frequently Asked Questions.