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Beat the Heat Tips for staying cool and healthy

Heat stroke occurs when the body overheats and is unable to cool down. It is a medical emergency in adults and children. According to the National Centers for Disease Control, it is the most serious of heat-related disorders. Potentially fatal, left untreated it also can cause organ damage such as kidney failure. Although exercising or overexerting yourself in the heat at any age can contribute to heat stroke, it is not the only risk factor.

“Exertion isn’t always to blame,” says Michael L. Hochberg, M.D., of EmCare, chairman of Emergency Medicine at Saint Peter’s University Hospital. “Prolonged exposure to heat and humidity alone can cause heat stroke.” Symptoms of heat stroke may include:



Dr. Michael L. Hochberg

- Palpitations
- Fatigue
- Hot, dry skin or profuse sweating
- Hallucinations
- Chills
- Throbbing headache
- High body temperature
- Dizziness
- Slurred speech
- Abdominal or muscle cramping
- Inconsolable behavior in infants
- Confusion in the elderly

Who is at risk?

Children are at greater risk of developing heat stroke because their bodies heat up 3 to 5 times faster than that of an adult. It sets in when the body’s core temperature rises, typically to temperatures of 106 degrees. Sweating stops and skin becomes red, hot and dry. “If the person isn’t sweating then the body is unable to release the heat,” says Melissa Harper,

M.D., of EmCare, an emergency medicine physician at Saint Peter’s. “It is important to get treatment right away and bring the temperature down as quickly as possible.”



Dr. Melissa Harper

Immediate first aid includes getting the person to a shaded area or an air-conditioned room or fanning the person if moving to an air-conditioned area is not possible. Ice packs can be placed on the neck, armpits and groin. The body can also be cooled down by spraying cool water from a hose or shower. It is important to get to an emergency department as soon as possible.

Tips for avoiding heat stroke include:

- Know what temperatures your body is comfortable in, so that you know when you have reached your tolerance.
- Stay hydrated with fluids that do not contain sugar, caffeine, or alcohol.
- Wear lightweight, light-colored, loose-fitting clothing.
- Drink more fluids (nonalcoholic), regardless of your activity level. Don’t wait until you’re thirsty to drink. Talk to your doctor about how much water to drink when it is hot if you have been told to limit fluids or are on water pills.
- Taking a cool shower or bath, or moving to an air-conditioned place is a good way to cool off.

- NEVER leave a child or those who are unable to take care of themselves in a car when it is hot outside.

“There are no definite guidelines,” Dr. Hochberg says, “for safe temperatures or time limits for heat exposure that can be potentially dangerous. But temperature isn’t as important as humidity,” he adds. “Humidity interferes more with our natural cooling mechanism, which is sweating. Most of us will be warned by our bodies to seek relief when heat becomes a danger.”

Always consult with your primary care physician about any health issues. If you are experiencing a medical emergency, please call 911.

