

KEEPING YOUR COOL—Understanding Heat Exhaustion and Heat Stroke

by Gail Graham

Heat exhaustion occurs when a person's core temperature increases to dangerous levels. Normally, evaporation of perspiration from the skin cools the body and blood. High humidity can interfere with the cooling process and problems can also arise when we don't drink enough fluid.

High risk individuals are those with pre-existing conditions, like heart or lung disease. Also a person who is overweight will store extra heat in the body longer than those who are less heavy. As we age, our bodies become less effective at regulating internal temperatures and young children are more at risk because their bodies have not yet developed an effective thermoregulatory system.

To avoid heat related problems, we all should:

- Drink plenty of water [a minimum of 6 to 8 glasses each day].
- Not drink alcohol or caffeine as they contribute to dehydration.
- Stay out of the sun.
- During protracted heat, go to air-conditioned environments (like malls or libraries), as possible.

If there is trouble, the first sign will usually be heat cramps and may include twitching in a leg, arm or abdominal muscles. If you experience heat cramps, get out of the heat, immediately, if possible, and drink plenty of fluids. Not dealing with heat cramps can lead to a very serious condition called heat exhaustion.

The symptoms of heat exhaustion include:

- Faintness
- Nausea/Vomiting
- Pale, Cold and Clammy Skin
- Rapid Heartbeat
- Dilation of Pupils

If a person has heat exhaustion, it is important to act quickly:



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- Get the person out of the sun and into a shady or air-conditioned location.
- Lay the person down and elevate the feet slightly.
- Loosen or remove the individual's clothing.
- Provide cool water (not iced) to drink, or an electrolyte sports drink.
- Cool the person by spraying with cool water and fanning.
- Monitor the person carefully—heat exhaustion can quickly become heat stroke, which can be deadly.

If fever, especially greater than 103°F, fainting, confusion, or seizures occur despite treatment, Dial 911, or call for emergency medical assistance.

The symptoms of heat stroke include:

- An extremely high body temperature—above 103°F
- Rapid strong pulse.
- Throbbing headache.
- Dizziness.
- Nausea.
- Confusion.
- Unconsciousness.

Heat stroke is a life threatening emergency that can lead to death and must be treated immediately:

- Ask someone to call 911 emergency.
- Get the victim to a shady area.
- Cool the victim as quickly as possible, using whatever methods are available. For example: Immerse the victim in a tub of cool water, or place in cool shower, spray with cool water from the garden hose, or sponge with cool water. If the humidity is low wrap the victim in cool wet sheet and fan vigorously.



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- **Monitor body temperature, and continue cooling efforts until the body temperature drops to 101-102 F.**

Do NOT give the victim alcohol to drink.

Sometimes a victim's muscles will 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 their side.

If emergency medical personnel are delayed, call the hospital emergency room for further instructions.

[SOURCES: www.Vitalco.net; www.mayo.edu; www.Drkoop.com; www.medicinenet.com; www.seas.smu.edu; mayohealth.org.]

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