

Avoid Heat-Related Illness

Tammy Roberts, MS, RD, LD
Nutrition & Health Education Specialist
robertstt@missouri.edu

The summer of 2011 may be one for the record books with all of the days with temperatures of over 100 degrees. It is important to remember that as the temperature increases, heat-related illness increases. The three forms of heat-related illness include: heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke.

Heat cramps usually occur as a result of heavy sweating, usually several hours after a person has been out of the heat. The cramps can be very painful and usually affect the arms legs or abdomen. To help prevent heat cramps, drink a fluid that has electrolytes during and after long periods of heavy sweating.

Heat exhaustion occurs when the body loses the ability to cool itself. This usually occurs when a person has been sweating heavily and not replacing fluids and electrolytes. Symptoms of heat exhaustion include headache, dizziness, rapid heart beat, loss of coordination, impaired judgment, anxiety, clammy skin and a weak, rapid pulse. Someone exhibiting these symptoms needs to be cooled down and drink fluids. Have them checked by a physician.

Heat stroke is the most serious heat-related illness and is life threatening. It occurs when the body has lost too much water and salt. With that loss is the body's inability to cool itself so body heat rises to dangerous levels. Symptoms of heat stroke include: a high body temperature with no sweating, any of the above symptoms of heat exhaustion, nausea and vomiting, seizures, difficulty breathing, and high blood pressure. If you suspect someone is having a heat stroke, call 911 and try to cool the person as quickly as possible.

The American Red Cross makes the following recommendations for preventing heat-related illness: 1. Wear light weight, light colored clothing. Carry an umbrella for shade. 2. Drink plenty of fluids. Water is a great choice. Fluids with electrolytes are recommended for long periods of heavy sweating. 3. Eat small meals more often. Digesting food actually creates heat in your body. 4. Avoid strenuous activity. If you must, do it in the morning before it gets too hot. 5. Stay indoors when possible. Seek a cool place if your home is not air conditioned. 6. Take regular breaks. If you must be exposed to the heat, be sure to take breaks and allow your body to cool.

Anyone can experience a heat-related illness but the very young and the very old are most at risk. For more information about heat-related illness, go to <http://www2.redcross.org/services/hss/tips/heat.html>.