

Seniors Can Beat the Heat and Stay Cool This Summer

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Fun family get-togethers, trips to the beach, backyard barbecues, vacations and other festivities make summer one of the most enjoyable times of the year. But when you plan your summer activities keep this advice in mind.

Our aging population is more active today. Experts tell us that as we age our bodies can't handle the heat like they did when we were younger. A senior body often doesn't detect the heat and will not begin sweating until their body temperature has skyrocketed. What's more, our body's cooling devices don't operate as efficiently as we age.

And that's what makes heat so dangerous for older adults. More people in the United States die from extreme heat every year than from hurricanes, lightning, tornadoes, floods and earthquakes combined. In 1999, for instance, nearly half of all heat fatalities (47 percent) were individuals past the age of 70, according to the National Weather Service.

Summer's scorching temperatures, however, don't have to wilt a senior's ability to enjoy the season. By taking some common-sense approaches to staying cool and hydrated, seniors can spend quality time with family and friends outdoors.

How do you stay cool and safe when the summer sun really heats up?

The American Red Cross urges everyone to exercise extreme caution and use the following tips to avoid a heat related illness:

Slow down. Avoid strenuous activity. If you must do strenuous activity, do it during the coolest part of the day, which is usually in the morning between 4:00 a.m. and 7:00 a.m. Stay indoors as much as possible. If air conditioning is not available, stay on the lowest floor, out of direct sunlight. Try to go to a public building with air conditioning each day for several hours or designated cooling shelters. Wear lightweight, light-colored clothing. Light colors will reflect the sun's energy. Drink plenty of water regularly and often, even if you do not feel thirsty. Water is the safest liquid to drink during heat emergencies. Avoid drinks with alcohol or caffeine in them. Eat small meals and eat more often. Avoid foods that are high in protein, which increase metabolic heat. Avoid using salt tablets unless directed to do so by a physician. Make sure your pets get plenty of water as well.

Over-exposure to heat can cause serious illness and even death. Recognizing the early warning signs of a heat-related illness is essential. It is especially important for family caregivers to keep an eye on small children and older persons in frail health.

You can spot a victim of heat exhaustion if they exhibit the following signs:

The person's skin appears to be cool, moist, pale (the skin may be red right after physical activity); skin may or may not feel hot.

Watch for complaints of headache or dizziness

If a person shows signs of weakness in the limbs or physical exhaustion, they may be in danger.

Nausea is a common indication of the presence of heat exhaustion.

Those suffering a more severe form of heat-related illness, commonly known as a heat stroke, show signs of:

Victim's skin may still be moist or they may stop sweating and the skin may be red, hot and dry

Look for decreased level of alertness or loss of consciousness

The person could have either a rapid or weak pulse

Heat stroke victims will have either a rapid or shallow breathing pattern

Vomiting is a clear signal of an emergency

A high body temperature (sometimes as high as 105 degrees) is an extremely dangerous sign.

How to provide care for heat exhaustion or heat stroke:

Get the person out of the heat. Move the person to the shade or a cooler environment.

Loosen any tight clothing.

Apply cool, wet cloths, such as towels or sheets, taking care to periodically remoisten the cloths.

Spraying the person with water and fanning them is also beneficial.

If the person is conscious, give him or her small amounts of cool water to drink (about 4 ounces every 15 minutes).

Let the person rest in a comfortable position and watch carefully for changes in his or her condition.

Refusing water, vomiting and changes in consciousness mean that the person's condition is getting worse.

If a person exhibits any signs of a serious heat-related illness it is important to call 9-1-1 or the local emergency number or seek immediate medical attention.

For more information on heat safety, contact your local American Red Cross chapter or visit "Facts & Tips" under the Health & Safety section on <http://www.redcross.org/>.

Remember that summertime isn't just for kids; seniors can have a safe and enjoyable summer season when they know how to play it cool.