CRISIS24 HORIZON

Advice Sheet - Personal Safety during Heat Waves

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Categories: Environment

Heat kills by stressing the human body beyond its capabilities to shed excess heat. In a normal year, thousands of people around the world succumb to summer's heat. An abnormally hot summer can claim thousands more.

How Heat Affects the Human Body

Human bodies dissipate heat by varying the rate and depth of blood circulation, by losing water through the skin and sweat glands, and by panting when blood is heated above 37 C (98.6 F). Sweating, by itself, does nothing to cool the body, unless the water is removed by evaporation, and high relative humidity retards evaporation. Under conditions of high temperature (above 32 C/90 F) and high relative humidity, the body is doing everything it can to maintain 37 C (98.6 F) inside.

Heat Illnesses

- *Sunburn:* In severe cases, sunburn involves swelling of skin, blisters, fever, and headaches. If breakage of blisters occurs, apply dry sterile dressing. Serious, extensive cases should be seen by a physician.

- *Heat cramps:* Heat cramps are muscular pains and spasms due to heavy exertion. Although heat cramps are the least severe reaction, they are an early signal that the body is having trouble with heat.

- *Heat exhaustion:* Heat exhaustion typically occurs when people exercise heavily or work in a hot, humid place where body fluids are lost through heavy sweating. Blood flow to the skin increases, causing blood flow to decrease to the vital organs. This results in a form of mild shock. If not treated, the victim may suffer heat stroke.

- *Heat Stroke:* Heat stroke is a severe medical emergency. Summon emergency medical assistance or get the victim to a hospital immediately.

Heat Terms

- *Heat wave*: Prolonged period of excessive heat and humidity. For example, the US National Weather Service issues alerts when the period of excessive heat and humidity will last for two days or more.

- *Heat index*: A number in degrees Fahrenheit (F) or Celsius (C) that tells how hot it really feels when relative humidity is added to the actual air temperature. Exposure to full sunshine can increase the heat index by 9 C (15 F). See http://www.crh.noaa.gov/pub/heat.php for more information on the heat index.

What to Do If a Heat Wave Is Forecast or Occurring

- Slow down. Avoid strenuous activity. If you must participate in strenuous activity, do it during the coolest part of the day, which is usually in the morning 04:00-07:00.
- Stay indoors as much as possible, especially during the hottest part of the day typically 11:00-15:00. If air conditioning is not available, stay on the lowest floor, out of the sunshine. Cover windows with drapes or shades, weather-strip doors and windows, use window reflectors to reflect the heat back outside and add insulation to keep the heat out. Turn off unnecessary incandescent light bulbs, computers or appliances to reduce heat generated in the home. Limit the use of the stove or oven. Try to go to a public building with air conditioning each day for several hours. Remember, electric fans do not cool the air, but they do help sweat evaporate, which cools your body.
- Wear lightweight, airy, light-colored, preferably cotton clothing. Light colors will reflect away some of the sun's energy.
- If possible, take a cold bath or shower. Splash yourself with water to keep cool.
- Drink plenty of water regularly and often. Your body needs water to keep cool. Drink plenty of fluids even if you do not feel thirsty. Salads and fruits have a high water content which can help to hydrate the body.
- Water is the safest liquid to drink during heat emergencies. Avoid drinks with alcohol or caffeine in them; they can make the heat's effects on your body worse. This is especially true of beer, which dehydrates the body.
- Eat small meals, and eat more often. Avoid foods that are high in protein, which increases metabolic heat.
- Do not leave people or pets in a closed car during a heat wave.

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