Advice Sheet - Personal Safety during Sandstorms

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Categories: Environment

Introduction

A sandstorm is created by strong, dry winds blowing over a desert or arid area that catch and carry along clouds of sand or dust so dense as to obscure the sun and drastically reduce visibility (typically to 400-800 meters/0.2-0.5 miles). Such currents are usually created by intense heating of the ground. Sandstorms often appear as a solid wall of dust as tall as 1,525 meters (approximately 1 mile), but most are 3-15 meters (10-50 ft) in height. They tend to exist only during the day and die out overnight when the surface temperatures decrease. The wind is powerful enough to move sand dunes, and it often interferes with travel over roads and trails.

A *haboob* is an intense dust storm that occurs when strong winds from a dying thunderstorm pick up sand, dirt, and dust particles. This phenomenon most commonly occurs in arid regions of the world, including the southwestern United States, central Australia, the Saharan Desert of Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula region. A *simoom* (or simoon) is the dust- and sand-laden desert wind found in North Africa and the Middle East. Many countries have other local names for these seasonal storms.

Medical Considerations

Unlike dust particles, which may cause allergic reactions, inhaled sand clogs air passages, and causes choking and ultimately collapse from a lack of oxygen. Sand blown at any speed can do substantial damage to vision; but sand moving faster than 16 kph (10 mph) can, and probably will, do permanent damage to a person's eyes.

As with any dangerous weather condition, sandstorms can cause injury or even death if the proper precautions are not taken.

What to Do in a Sandstorm on Foot:

- Use a wet piece of cloth or a bandana to cover your mouth.
- Rub petroleum jelly along the inside of your nostrils. This will minimize the risk that your mucous membranes will dry up.
- Wear goggles or glasses to protect your eyes.
- Groups of people are recommended to stay together. Lock elbows and hands to form a chain.
- Move to higher ground, where the storm is weakest.

- Take cover on the leeward side of a large object.
- Wear heavy clothing with long pants, socks, and shoes to protect the body.

What to Do in a Sandstorm in a Vehicle:

- If possible move to higher ground with grass, dirt, or sand (only if there is no risk of lightning).
- Point your car away from oncoming sand and deflate tires to minimum pressure (but only if you can reinflate them).
- Follow the above advice to protect your nose, mouth, eyes and skin.
- If the road becomes impassable, pull onto the shoulder as far as possible, and turn off the vehicle's lights. If lights are visible, other motorists may attempt to "follow" your car and inadvertently drive off the road into your vehicle. Close all windows and vents.

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