

Heat-Related Illness

What you can do to prevent it

What causes heat-related illness?

Heat-related illnesses, such as “heatstroke” and “sunstroke,” occur when your body can’t keep itself cool. As the air temperature rises, your body stays cool when your sweat evaporates. On hot, humid days, the evaporation of sweat is slowed by the increased moisture in the air. When sweating isn’t enough to cool your body, your body temperature rises, and you may become ill. Common symptoms of heat illness are headache, dizziness, muscle weakness or muscle cramps, nausea and vomiting.

Signs of heat-related illness

- Headache
- Dizziness
- Muscle weakness or cramps
- Nausea and vomiting

What does it mean when weather forecasters talk about the heat index?

The heat index tells you how hot it feels outside in the shade. It is *not* the same as the outside temperature. The heat index is a measurement of how hot it *feels* when relative humidity is combined with the effects of the air temperature. When you are standing in full sunshine, the heat index value is even higher. A heat index of 90° or above is dangerous.

How can I prevent heat illness?

When the heat index is high, stay indoors in air-conditioned areas when possible. If you must go outside, take these precautions:

- Wear lightweight, light-colored, loose-fitting clothes.
- Protect yourself from the sun by wearing a hat or using an umbrella.
- Drink plenty of water *before* starting an outdoor activity. Drink extra water all day. Drink less tea, coffee, cola and alcoholic beverages.

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- Schedule vigorous outdoor activities for cooler times of the day—before 10 a.m. and after 6 p.m.
 - During an outdoor activity, take frequent breaks and drink water or other fluids every 15 to 20 minutes, even if you don't feel thirsty. If you have clear, pale urine, you are probably drinking enough fluids.
 - If you have a chronic medical problem, ask your doctor about how to deal with the heat and about drinking extra fluids and about your medicines.

What should I do if I have signs of heat illness?

Go to a shady, cooler area right away. Remove any excess clothing and begin sponging your body with lukewarm tap water. Slowly sip water or other fluids.

Get medical help right away if you have these warning signs:

- Hot, dry skin, but not sweaty.
- Confusion or loss of consciousness.
- Frequent vomiting.
- Shortness of breath or trouble breathing.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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