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Staying Safe in a Hot Environment

The scorching days of summer are certainly upon us! We've already had several 100 degree days and the immediate forecast doesn't offer much relief in sight. Janet M. Pollard, MPH, AgriLife Extension Associate Health, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, Texas A&M System has written an article that will help you have a better understanding of the danger, prevention, and treatment of summer heat.

Excessive exposure to a hot environment, especially while active or working, can bring about a variety of heat-induced symptoms – some mild and some severe. Heat illness can range from mild to moderate cramping and leg swelling to more severe heat exhaustion and even fatal heat stroke if the body's temperature is not brought down. In all these cases, you will want to get the person to a cooler environment – an air conditioned building if possible – or under a shade tree or other shaded area if air conditioning is not available. You will also want to be sure the person is hydrated with regular sips of cool (not ice cold) water or electrolyte-containing sports drink (unless vomiting ensues or heat stroke symptoms are evident).

For cramping, you can apply firm pressure or gentle massage.
For leg swelling, elevate the legs. Call a doctor if elevation doesn't bring the swelling down.
For heat exhaustion (characterized by dizziness or feeling faint, headache, nausea, profuse sweating, clammy/cool skin, rapid/weak pulse, low-grade fever, low blood pressure, and ashen or pale appearance), get the person out of the sun; lay him/her down; and cool the body with cool, wet cloths (changing them often) or by spraying or sponging the body with cool water.

If signs of heat stroke are present (characterized by high body temperature [103 degrees F, orally]; red, hot, dry skin; no sweating; rapid heartbeat; rapid, shallow breathing; dizziness; nausea, confusion, irritability, and/or unconsciousness), call 9-1-1 immediately, and begin cooling the body in whatever way possible. Time is crucial, so use whatever means are available for cooling – get the victim to shade or air conditioning; immerse the victim in a cool bath or shower, or spray with a garden water hose; sponge or spray with cool water. If the humidity is low, you can wrap the victim in a cool, wet sheet and fan him/her vigorously. Do NOT give the victim fluids in this case.

To stay safe in the heat and prevent heat illness, allow your body to adjust by limiting your activity at first. Slow down and avoid strenuous activity during the hottest parts of the day (between 10 am B 4 pm), if possible. Wear a wide-brimmed hat; wrap around, 100 percent UV protective sunglasses; and loose fitting, lightweight, light-colored clothing to allow some of the

sun's energy to be reflected away from the body. Drink plenty of water even if you are not thirsty. Your body needs water to stay cool. If you are doing strenuous activity for more than 1 hour, try an electrolyte-replenishing drink, like Gatorade or Powerade. Eat well-balanced, light, regular meals. Avoid salt tablets unless directed to do so by your doctor.

Check on family, friends, and neighbors who do not have air conditioning or who spend much of their time alone. If possible, spend the warmest part of the day in public buildings with air conditioning, such as libraries, schools, theaters, malls, or other community facilities. If air conditioning is not available, stay on the lowest level of the building. Never leave children or pets alone in a closed vehicle, even when you crack or roll down the windows – temperatures inside a vehicle climb higher than the outdoor temperature.

Giving the body time to adjust to the heat, staying hydrated, and being aware of the signs of heat illness can help keep you and your loved ones safe in the sun.

For more information, contact the Texas AgriLife Extension Service office at 903/473-5000, ext. 157.

For more information on issues related to heat, please see our *HealthHints* newsletter at <http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/healthhints/2008/aug/>

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