

As temperatures rise, so does risk for heat-related illness

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Staying properly hydrated throughout the day is one of the most important steps for avoiding serious heat-related illnesses like heat exhaustion or heatstroke. Credit: Laura McKenzie/Texas A&M University Division of Marketing & Communications

As extreme heat sweeps the nation, millions of people are expected to face abnormally hot weather this summer. When the temperatures rise and humidity increases, so does the heat index, which is how hot it feels to the human body—and that raises the risk of developing a heat-related injury.

Dr. Gabriel Neal, clinical professor and head of primary care and rural medicine at Texas A&M University School of Medicine, gives the following advice for staying safe during the summer months.

Sun safety

An obvious tactic to protect ourselves from heat-related illness is to limit our time in the sun. The sun is most potent between the hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. If you plan to be in [direct sunlight](#) in the middle of the day, make sure that you're wearing effective protection, staying well hydrated, stopping to take breaks and getting into the shade as much as possible.

One of the most valuable precautions we can take in the summer months is protect ourselves from the harmful ultraviolet radiation from the sun. Sunburns are extremely common but can be prevented by protecting yourself with clothing and sunscreen.

Everyone is advised to use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher. Generously apply the sunscreen to all skin not covered by clothing and reapply every hour to ensure proper protection.

Every sunburn increases a person's risk for skin cancer. By examining your skin, you can spot early signs of [skin cancer](#). If you see any changing spots or worrisome freckles on your skin, you should ask your doctor to evaluate it. This is a good time to identify any [suspicious changes on your skin](#) that could be cancerous.

Don't just stop at sunscreen. Clothing is one of the most effective ways to protect ourselves from the sun—and it is the simplest, because you don't have to worry about reapplying sunscreen to the covered areas.

The more skin your outfit covers, the better your protection, so loose-fitting long sleeves and pants are preferred. Additionally, wearing a wide-brimmed hat is a simple and effective way to protect our face, ears and areas of our body that often see the sun.

Heat illness

In the summer months it's easy to get dehydrated and overheated, so it's critical to intentionally maintain good hydration. Neal says water is the best thing you can drink to avoid dehydration.

"Beverages that have alcohol or caffeine may be refreshing in the moment, but they're not as replenishing as water and contribute to diuresis," he said.

Diuresis is the action of excessive urination which can lead to dehydration. A lack of water affects the body's ability to function normally.

Another common problem encountered in the summertime is [heat stroke or heat-related injuries](#). The body overheats when people participate in prolonged physical exertions during high temperatures. There are certain symptoms that you might encounter if you're experiencing a heat-related illness.

"These symptoms might include lightheadedness, dizziness, heart palpitations (racing heart), nausea, shaking and just feeling overheated," Neal said.

If you're experiencing any of these symptoms, get out of the sun and get to a cool place preferably indoors, begin hydrating and seek help. Symptoms of a heat-related illness signify that it's time to take a break from the sun and possibly seek medical attention.

"Something that we don't consider often is the effect of medications that we take and their relation to becoming dehydrated and developing heat-related illness in the summer," Neal said.

[Many medications lead to dehydration](#), especially in the heat of the summer. So, if you're taking medications, ask your doctor if any of the medications you're taking are putting you at a greater risk for dehydration. If your doctor says yes, be far more intentional with hydrating during the summer months to prevent a heat-related illness.

The challenge of summer is enjoying the sun without the harmful ultraviolet radiation. Take advantage of the early morning hours of 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. and the evening hours of 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. when the direct ultraviolet radiation is minimized. This is an ideal time to exercise to promote physical and mental health.

The summer months are a great time to engage with your family, friends and community. By implementing these simple tips, you can lower the risk of experiencing heat-related illness or sunburn and enjoy your time in the sun.

Provided by Texas A&M University

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