

# Hot temps can create serious health problems

By Tamara Burns

As an emergency room nurse, I have cared for visitors and locals who experience heat-related illnesses. This includes dehydration, heat exhaustion and heat stroke.

It is important to understand the differences, especially when exercising in an area like Lake Tahoe with higher altitudes and higher temperatures.

Dehydration occurs when the body does not have enough fluid to carry out normal functions. Young children, older adults, and people with chronic illnesses are most at risk. Common causes include intense diarrhea, vomiting, or excessive sweating. Not drinking enough water during hot weather or exercise also may cause dehydration.

Mild to moderate dehydration symptoms include:

- Dry, sticky mouth
- Fatigue
- Feeling thirsty
- Headache
- Not urinating
- Dry skin
- Constipation
- Dizzy/lightheaded.

You may reverse dehydration by drinking more fluids, but

severe dehydration requires medical treatment.

Heat exhaustion can occur after a prolonged dehydration period. Triggers that cause the body to overheat include extended time in higher temperatures, and strenuous activity. Symptoms may appear suddenly, or develop over time, particularly after extended periods of exercise.

**Possible symptoms of heat exhaustion include:**

- Confusion
- Headache
- Muscle cramps
- Nausea
- Pale skin
- Fatigue
- Rapid heartbeat.

Treatment for dehydration and heat exhaustion is straight forward. **If you, or anyone else, has mild or moderate symptoms of a heat-related illness, I recommend:**

- Drink plenty of fluids (avoid caffeine and alcohol)
- Take a cool shower/bath/sponge bath
- Remove any tight or unnecessary clothing.

If this does not provide relief within an hour, contact a doctor because heat exhaustion can progress to heat stroke.

Heat stroke is the most serious heat injury. If the body's core reaches 104 degrees, this is a medical emergency. If you suspect someone has heat stroke, also called sunstroke, call 911 immediately. Help cool the patient until paramedics arrive.

The National Athletic Trainers Association released guidelines in June suggesting that heat stroke victims need immediate cooling before going to a hospital.

**Symptoms of heat stroke:**

- Fainting (may be first sign)
- Nausea
- Altered mental state: person agitated, aggressive, or confused
- Dizziness/lightheadedness
- Red, hot, and dry skin
- Rapid heartbeat
- Muscle weakness, cramps
- Throbbing headache
- Seizures.

The safest approach is prevention and education. In hot weather, drink fluids regularly to help prevent dehydration and heat-related illness. Avoid waiting until you feel thirsty, you may be dehydrated. Monitor fluid loss during hot weather, illness, or exercise, and consume liquids to replace water loss. Sports beverages can replace salts and minerals after you sweat. Wear sun protection, including a brimmed hat, sunglasses, and sunscreen. Take breaks in the shade and wear lightweight, loose-fitting clothing.

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