

Preventing Heat-Related Illnesses

Heat Illness, Warning Signs & Response

Heat-related illnesses are caused when an individual is subjected to extreme temperatures and humidity, and is unable to cool down. Dehydration also can be a factor. Dehydration makes it more difficult for your body to function properly and takes a toll on your performance.

The acute warning signs of heat illness can include nausea, headache, weakness, fainting, poor concentration, flushed skin, light headedness, loss of muscle coordination, fatigue, and vomiting.

Coaches working with kids should know children may be less tolerant of heat stress than adults, and may be at greater risk for heat illness.

Some athletes may experience heat cramps. This type of cramp is the tightening and spasms experienced in muscle. It is often preceded by heavy sweating and large electrolyte losses. If an athlete is experiencing heat cramps, he or she should stop the activity, find a cool spot to gently stretch and massage the muscle, and drink appropriate fluids like sports drinks that contain important electrolytes including sodium.

Heat exhaustion is another type of heat illness. Conditions and signs of this problem can include profuse sweating, dehydration, fatigue, lightheadedness, rapid pulse, and low blood pressure. Body temperature may be slightly elevated. If heat exhaustion is suspected, the athlete should lie in a cool place with legs elevated, have cool, wet towels applied to the body, drink cool fluids, and have someone monitor their vital signs. With heat exhaustion, often the ill athlete feels better when he or she rests in a cool place and replenishes fluids by drinking cool liquids. Continue to monitor the athlete. If signs are present that the illness is severe or progressing, activate the emergency action plan and follow the emergency action steps, Check-Call-Care. Check the player for signs. Call 911 or the local emergency number immediately. Have someone administer your emergency care plan.

Heat stroke is the most serious heat-related illness. With heat stroke an athlete will have a high body temperature – 104° F or higher - and could have red, hot, dry or moist skin, vomit, be incoherent or lose consciousness, have shallow breathing and/or a weak pulse. He or she might experience mild shock, convulsions, or a coma, and can die from heat stroke. If he or she goes into respiratory or cardiac arrest, begin rescue breathing or CPR, as appropriate. Cool by any means possible, as quickly as possible. Place player in an ice bath, or apply ice bags to the body, or (if ice is not available) continually place very cold towels on the body of the player. While treating, call for emergency medical services (EMS) and continue cooling and monitoring the player while awaiting EMS.

What Coaches Should Know

When players are practicing or competing, coaches should follow the following steps to help prevent heat-related illnesses:

- Allow 10-14 days for adjusting to warmer climate/temperatures
- Reduce intensity and/or length of training with high temperatures and/or humidity
- Schedule practice during cooler times of day
- Schedule and enforce frequent drink breaks and rest periods
- Remove pads and practice in T-shirts and shorts

Overexposure to high temperature and humidity can cause heat-related illnesses. The National Weather Service issues heat alerts when the daytime heat index (a combination of temperature and humidity) is 105° F or more, which can dramatically increase the risk of the most serious heat-related illnesses. At 80-105° F, fatigue and heat stroke are also possible with prolonged exposure. Athletes playing in the heat for long periods of time wearing protective padding are especially at risk.

Primary contributors to heat-related emergencies include:

- Heat and high humidity
- Extreme physical exertion
- Layered or rubberized clothing
- Inadequate fluid intake

Certain types of athletes might be at a higher risk for heat-related illness and should be monitored closely. These types of players include those with a prior history of heat illness, overweight or obese players, and those with a medical history of gastrointestinal, diabetic, kidney, or heart problems. They require special attention by coaches and quick action if any symptom of heat illness is noticed.

When necessary, coaches should instruct players to do the following:

- Wear net-type jerseys
- Wear T-shirts and shorts, not pads, as they acclimate to the heat
- Remove helmets when not playing or scrimmaging
- Avoid wearing sweatshirts and excess clothing
- Change sweat-soaked clothing
- Take frequent breaks and drink to match sweat losses

Without taking precautionary measures, a player might experience a heat-related illness. In some cases, they might be unaware he is experiencing this condition and continue practicing. Coaches should periodically check players during practice or workouts for symptoms related to heat exhaustion.

Hot Weather Safety Tips

An important step in avoiding heat illness is adjusting practice or game length and intensity to the environmental conditions. Temperature and humidity combine to create conditions that can produce heat illness and dehydration.

- An air temperature of 95 degrees Fahrenheit is high risk regardless of the humidity.
- An air temperature of 85 degrees Fahrenheit and humidity of 60 percent or above.
- An air temperature of 75 degrees Fahrenheit and humidity of 90 percent or above.

Hydration Guidelines

- Flavored, cold, lightly salted, sports drinks improve voluntary fluid replacement by players, especially the younger athletes
- Ideally, a player should be fully hydrated before beginning practice or competition. Fluids lost through sweat and breathing should be replaced by fluid consumption including during workouts and games (physical activity).
- During activity, players should have unrestricted access to appropriate fluids. Thirst is not a good indicator of the need to hydrate.
- The best approach, particularly in hot environments, is to have players weigh in and out each day to help determine adequate fluid replacement needs. Following a competition or workout, the coach should have players weigh out and drink enough to match their weight loss. Remember 16 ounces is one pound. For each pound that the player did not replace, the player may need to consume 20-24 ounces to fully rehydrate for the next training session.
- Players should consume food and drinks that contain a liberal amount of salt. Sports drinks provide some benefit over water because they give athletes fluid to rehydrate, carbohydrates to fuel muscles, and important electrolytes like sodium to help maintain fluid balance.
- Ideally, a player should be fully hydrated before beginning practice or competition. Fluids lost through sweat and breathing should be replaced by fluid consumption