

Live Well,  
Work Well



## Surviving the Summer Heat



Summer brings longer days and plenty of sunshine, but with it comes the challenge of staying cool amidst soaring temperatures. The sweltering heat can lead to various heat-related illnesses, some of which can be serious if not addressed promptly.

This article explores common heat-related illnesses and offers tips for preventing them.

### Heat Syncope

Heat syncope is when someone suddenly faints due to being in a hot environment, especially after standing for a long time or getting up quickly from a sitting or lying down position. Heat syncope occurs as the body tries to cool itself down by widening blood vessels, which, in turn, can cause blood pressure to drop. This can make it hard for enough blood to reach the brain, leading to fainting. Usually, lying down and elevating the legs can help individuals recover quickly. If someone is about to faint from heat syncope, they might feel or exhibit the following symptoms:

- Dizziness
- Lightheadedness
- Nausea
- Blurry vision
- Rapid heart rate
- Sweating

Those not used to the heat, older adults, people with heart conditions and those taking medications that affect blood pressure have a higher risk of heat syncope. To prevent heat syncope, drink plenty of water, wear light, loose-fitting clothes, and take regular breaks in cool or shaded areas. Additionally, avoid getting up too quickly from a sitting or lying position to keep your blood pressure steady.

### Heat Rash

Heat rash occurs when sweat ducts become blocked and trap sweat beneath the skin. Common in hot, humid environments, it often affects areas where skin folds or where clothing creates friction. Symptoms of heat rash include the following:

- Small, red bumps on the skin
- Itchy or prickly sensations
- Slight swelling

Excessive sweating, tight clothing and prolonged periods of physical activity can increase your risk of developing heat rash. You can avoid it by wearing loose-fitting clothes with breathable fabrics, such as cotton or linen. Also, refrain from using thick lotions or creams that may clog your pores, and use fragrance-free soaps that won't dry or irritate your skin.

### Heat Cramps

When you sweat excessively due to heat or physical activity, it can cause an imbalance in electrolytes, which can lead to muscle cramps or spasms. Although heat cramps aren't typically serious, they are a sign the body is struggling to cope with the heat and that further measures should be taken to prevent more severe heat illnesses from occurring. You might have heat cramps if you're experiencing:

- Tight muscles with mild to severe pain
- Stiff or curled toes
- Flushed or moist skin

Heat cramps are common for those who work outdoors. Notably, even if you're mostly indoors for work, your risk of developing heat cramps increases if you have preexisting conditions, are on a low-sodium diet or are taking certain medications (e.g., blood pressure pills, diuretics or antidepressants). If you start feeling heat cramp symptoms, immediately stop any activity and get out of the heat, if possible. Stretch and massage the cramping muscle and apply a cold compress. You may also drink milk, coconut water, sports drinks or an oral rehydration solution to replenish your body's lost electrolytes.

## Heat Exhaustion

Heat exhaustion is a serious condition that occurs when the body loses an excessive amount of water and salt through sweating. Without intervention, heat exhaustion can escalate to heatstroke. The symptoms of heat exhaustion can appear suddenly without warning or develop gradually over time. They include the following:

- Pale, moist skin
- Weakness
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Headache
- Muscle cramps
- Fever of 100 F or higher

You are more likely to experience heat exhaustion if you engage in strenuous physical activity in hot, humid environments. People not acclimated to high temperatures (such as those living in cooler climates who suddenly encounter hot weather) are also at higher risk. In general, the elderly, young children and individuals with chronic health conditions like heart disease or diabetes are the most susceptible to heat exhaustion. If someone is experiencing heat exhaustion, move them to a cool place and remove unnecessary clothing like jackets or socks. Offer them cool water to replenish fluids, then use a spray bottle or damp cloth to apply cool water to their skin. Fanning them and placing cold packs on their neck can also help.

## Heatstroke

Heat exhaustion, if not treated, can lead to life-threatening heatstroke. Heatstroke happens when the body's temperature regulation fails and body temperature rises to 104 F or higher. A person experiencing this medical emergency may also exhibit the following symptoms:

- Disorientation or confusion
- Loss of consciousness
- Hot and dry skin
- Rapid pulse

Heatstroke requires immediate medical attention to prevent permanent damage or death. If you see someone possibly suffering from heatstroke, call 911. Until help arrives, remove excess clothing and drench the skin with cool water. Place ice on the neck, armpits and groin to help cool the body down. If the person is alert, give them cool fluids to drink.

## Summary

Summer heat can be more than uncomfortable; it can threaten your health. When left untreated, heat-related illnesses can become life-threatening.

If heat-related symptoms don't improve within an hour, contact a doctor, and seek immediate medical attention if the person has heatstroke.