

BE HEAT SMART

DO YOU KNOW THAT HEAT-RELATED ILLNESSES CAN POTENTIALLY HARM YOUR HEALTH? **RASHIDA TAYABALI** EXPLAINS.

WARMER WEATHER brings more outdoor activities and time spent in the sun.

You use sunscreen and sunglasses for protection against the sun's harmful rays, but what about the health risks associated with high summer temperatures? Heatwaves have killed more people than any other natural hazard in Australia. The Australian Medical Association estimates that by the year 2100 about 15,000 Australians could die annually from heat-related illnesses.

WHAT ARE HEAT-RELATED ILLNESSES?

When your body is exposed to prolonged high temperatures, extreme humidity or dehydration it stops self-regulating core body temperature through sweat evaporation. The body overheats, exposing you to the risk of developing heat stress or rash, heat stroke or heat exhaustion.

Normally, your body self-regulates an increase in core body temperature by sending more blood to the skin, exposing it to a cooler external temperature (called vasodilation). Sweat also evaporates, cooling both the skin and blood in the underlying capillaries. Dehydration and high humidity levels reduce the efficiency of this process. A rise in blood temperature leads to a higher core body temperature, which is a problem if it happens quickly over a short period of time.

AM I AT RISK?

Everyone who spends a lot of time outdoors in hot weather is at risk of developing heat stress, heat stroke or heat exhaustion. The greatest risk groups are outdoor workers, athletes engaging in vigorous physical activity (especially marathons), babies and young children, the elderly and those with chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease.

HEAT STRESS/RASH

WHAT IT IS: Occurs when sweat ducts become blocked and inflamed after being exposed to heat and humidity. The toxins run into nearby tissues causing



the itching and prickling sensations, also called 'prickly heat'.

SYMPTOMS: Tiny red spots, an irritating itch and prickling sensation, redness and a mild swelling on the affected area.

TREATMENT: Wear light, loose-fitting soft clothes made of breathable, natural fabrics like cotton to allow sweat to evaporate. Stay in a cool or well-ventilated area. Have frequent cool baths/showers, dry skin thoroughly and use unperfumed talcum powder on the skin. Calamine lotion or prickly rash lotion can be used to treat prickly heat. Finally, do not scratch.

Don't use ointments or creams. They prevent sweat from evaporating by keeping skin warm and moist.

HEAT EXHAUSTION

WHAT IT IS: Occurs when the body is dehydrated by being exposed to high temperatures for a sustained period or through strenuous physical activity in hot weather. Heat exhaustion also takes place when large volumes of sweat are replaced with fluids that lack enough salt.

SYMPTOMS: Excessive sweating, weakness, pale skin, extreme thirst, a fast heartbeat, dizziness or fainting, nausea or vomiting, muscle and stomach cramps, a raised body temperature.

TREATMENT: Move to a cool environment, for example, a shady spot or an air conditioned room, drink cool fluids. Drink water or sports drinks containing electrolytes and cool down by spraying your skin with water and fanning.

Don't drink icy or alcoholic drinks as they may cause stomach cramps and increase dehydration. Heat exhaustion can sometimes lead to a heat stroke so watch out for signs of confusion or

disorientation.

HEAT STROKE/HYPERTHERMIA

WHAT IT IS: Occurs when the core body temperature rises above 40.5°C triggering thickening of blood and tissue damage. Hyperthermia if untreated leads to failure of body organs, and even death.

SYMPTOMS: Produces similar symptoms to heat exhaustion (above) with hallucinations, coma and seizures, skin looks red and feels dry and hot, a lack of sweat and a rapid pulse.

TREATMENT: Call for urgent medical assistance. Meanwhile, cool the person's body quickly using whatever is available. Move the person to a shady or air conditioned area, immerse in cool water, fan vigorously and place ice packs at temperature points like wrists, armpits, groin and side of the neck. If the person becomes unconscious or vomits, position them on their side and clear their airway. Give cool, non-alcoholic drinks if conscious to reduce their body temperature. And don't delay in seeking medical help, call triple zero (000) immediately.

PRECAUTIONS IN HOT WEATHER

To prevent a heat-related illness take proper precautions during hot weather. Stay out of the sun during the hottest time of the day, generally between 11 am to 3 pm and restrict strenuous exercises to early mornings or late afternoons and evenings.

Drink between 100 to 200ml of water or other cool drinks often without waiting to feel thirsty. Avoid alcohol or sugar laden drinks because they help to speed up fluid loss through urination.

Wear breathable, protective clothing when outdoors to further reduce your risk of a heat-related illness. Also, protect your pets from hot weather because high temperatures can have similar effects on their health. Enjoy hot weather this summer by maintaining good health and staying cool.

RASHIDA TAYABALI

Rashida Tayabali is a Sydney-based freelance writer. She can be contacted via www.rashidatayabali.weebly.com