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Athletes not alone in risk of heat stroke

Kids enjoy summer with a break from school, adults often take time off from work, and the weather encourages everyone to get outside and soak up the sun. But the same enjoyable weather can be dangerous if precautions aren't taken.

Time outdoors can be delightful but it can also prove deadly. One of the more overlooked health risks each summer is heat stroke, particularly among athletes. University of North Carolina professor Frederick O. Mueller, in his Annual Survey of Football Injuries, cites 33 heat stroke-related deaths between 1995 and 2008. Most notable among those was the late Korey Stringer, an American football player who died from complications of heat stroke in 2001 during training camp with the Minnesota Vikings.

Stringer's death helped shed light on heat stroke, though it might have also given the false impression that heat stroke can only be suffered by those physically exerting themselves in summer heat. But anyone can fall victim to heat stroke, highlighting the importance of understanding heat stroke before it is too late.

What Is Heat Stroke?

A form of hyperthermia, heat stroke occurs when body temperature is abnormally elevated and is accompanied by physical and neurological symptoms. Heat stroke is a genuine medical emergency, one that requires prompt treatment to avoid fatal consequences.

Why Does Body Temperature Rise?

Heat stroke can be confusing, especially for those who spend ample time outdoors when temperatures are hot. A person might be used to summer heat and all of a sudden suffer heat stroke. This leaves many questioning why body temperature rises during heat stroke. This is easily explained.

Normally, the human body generates heat through metabolism and is often capable of dispersing this heat either through radiation of heat through the skin or through evaporation of sweat. However, during per-



Many people mistakenly assume heat stroke can only occur after physical exertion in extreme heat.

iods of extreme heat or when a person is vigorously exerting themselves under the sun, the body might experience difficulty dispersing the heat it generates. This results in rising body temperature.

Another reason body temperature might rise is dehydration. When dehydrated, the body might not be able to sweat fast enough to disperse heat, again resulting in elevated body temperature.

Who Is Most Susceptible to Heat Stroke?

Thanks in large part to deaths of athletes that are heavily publicized, many people assume athletes are most susceptible to heat stroke. While athletes increase their risk of heat stroke whenever exercising in extreme heat, others are at risk for heat stroke as well.

Among those also at risk for heat stroke are the elderly. This is often due to medi-

cations that might make them vulnerable to heat stroke. In addition, elderly persons diagnosed with heart, lung or kidney disease are also at risk of heat stroke.

Infants are also at risk of heat stroke, as is anyone who works outdoors under the sun.

What Symptoms Indicate Heat Stroke?

Elderly people suffering from heat stroke might feel as though they are having a heart attack. That's because symptoms of heat stroke sometimes mimic those of a heart attack. Though not all symptoms of heat stroke will necessarily appear, and different people may suffer different symptoms, the following are some of the common signs and symptoms of heat stroke:

- * absence of sweating, with red or flushed dry skin
- * high body temperature
- * difficulty breathing
- * rapid pulse
- * disorientation
- * hallucinations
- * feelings of confusion

How Should a Heat Stroke Victim Be Treated?

If a medical professional is available, it's always best to leave a heat stroke victim's care to the professionals. However, heat stroke victims need immediate assistance to reduce the risk of organ damage. So if no professionals are around to help, the following approach can help reduce the risk of long-standing side effects and possibly even death.

1. Cool the victim.
2. Get the victim into the shade, remove the victim's clothing and apply cool water to the skin.
3. Fan the victim to promote sweating and evaporation, and if available place ice packs under the armpits and in the groin.
4. Continually monitor body temperature and cooling the victim until the body temperature drops to 101-102 F.

For more information on heat stroke, consult a physician.

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