

How to keep children healthy and hydrated during the extreme summer heat

July 28 2016, by Leha Byrd



Credit: Virginia Commonwealth University

The National Weather Service recently issued several heat advisories for

the Richmond area in response to a week's worth of forecasted temperatures that exceeded 90 degrees. Such oppressive heat poses health threats to the most vulnerable community members, including the elderly and children. For the latter, infants and children up to four years of age are at greatest risk, health officials say.

Consequently, summer, kid-friendly trips to the beach and amusement and water parks should be scheduled against the peak hours of [heat](#) and humidity. Children face a much greater risk of dehydration and heat-related illness because the surface area of their bodies is high compared to their body mass, so they absorb more heat from the environment.

Corri Miller-Hobbs, the Safe Kids VA program coordinator at Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU, answered questions from VCU News about how parents can ensure their [children](#) have fun despite the fierce summer heat.

At what point, with regard to temperature and humidity, is it unsafe for trips to the beach, amusement parks, etc. with children.

I would suggest that before and during outdoor trips, adults should track the weather and follow the National Weather Service's heat advisories. The younger the child, obviously the harder it is for their body to manage temperature adjustments in extreme temperatures. So when planning, it's important to focus on short trips outdoors with plenty of hydration, nutrition and sunscreen. Don't be fooled by being in the water; the elevated temperatures still affect everyone and frequent breaks and good care are still necessary. It's also important to teach children early to notice cues from their body and also plan time for breaks. It is difficult for kids to stop playing and be responsible, but these are good lessons to begin teaching them.

What factors make it unsafe for children to be out in extreme heat?

Children overheat up to five times faster than adults, just because of their size and how their body systems function. They also sweat less than adults, so it is harder for them to cool off. Children are excited and enjoy the outdoors, so they don't want to quit their activity. They need direct [adult supervision](#) to make decisions about hydration, nutrition, taking breaks and their surroundings. Children are not able to anticipate dangerous situations such as playing a sport for too long without a break.

What precautions should be taken if children must be out in extreme weather conditions?

Infants less than six months [old] should be kept out of direct sunlight. Children should wear cool, comfortable clothing and hats. Children and adults should take it slow at first to get used to the heat and humidity gradually. Adult supervision is key. They must monitor the weather, the activity, hydration and use of sunscreen for any children for which they're responsible. Plan to be outside early in the morning and avoid peak heat hours, 10 a.m. until 4 p.m., as much as possible. Begin hydration 30 minutes before an activity, and then have fluid breaks every 15 to 20 minutes during outdoor activity. Water intake should be 4-to-8 ounces per break. Parents should be prepared with cold drinks, water, bandages, insect repellent, sunscreen, an EpiPen for kids with known allergies, a thermometer and cell phone. If your child is participating in a team sport, check with the coach regarding the emergency action plan and to ensure they have parents' contact information. Hydration breaks should be scheduled and become more frequent as the heat and humidity rises.

On extremely hot days, what are some alternatives to

being out during peak hours?

Be creative regarding activities that occur indoors like free museum days, family board games and online educational activities. Or, help your child learn an age-appropriate craft or hobby that can be done inside, or visit a library.

What should parents do if they believe their child might be suffering the effects of heat exhaustion or [heat stroke](#)?

Move the child to an air-conditioned or shaded area. Remove any extra clothing or equipment. Cool them with cold water, cold towels or fans. Have the child lie flat with their legs raised about heart level. If they're not nauseated or vomiting, have them drink cold water or a sports drink. If the child exhibits no rapid improvement, take them to the emergency department or call 911.

How common are heat-related illnesses for children during the summer?

They are common, though many children experience more mild symptoms that may not overtly indicate heat exhaustion. Those milder symptoms can include irritability or crankiness, headache, profuse sweating, pale skin and dizziness.

For toddlers who are less able to communicate how they feel, what signs indicate they are suffering the effects of [heat exhaustion](#) or heat stroke?

If after being in [extreme heat](#) a toddler seems confused or exhibits actions uncharacteristic from their normal behavior, consider that they may be suffering from their exposure to the heat. Those behaviors might include having red and hot skin, nausea or either a strong, rapid pulse or

a slow, weak pulse. Toddlers don't sweat, so their skin is often red, hot and dry. Parents and care providers can visit www.chrichmond.org for more information about keeping children healthy and hydrated during the summer months.

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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