

Parents, coaches: Help young athletes avoid summer heat hazards

April 22 2024, by Ernie Mundell



Another broiling summer looms, along with another season of kids' summer sports.

It's a potentially harmful, even lethal combination. But experts at Nationwide Children's Hospital (NCH) have advice for kids, parents and coaches on how to keep young athletes safe when thermometers rise.

Each year, an estimated 240 people die from heat-linked illnesses, and [heat stroke](#) is the third-ranked cause of death for young U.S. high school athletes, according to NCH.

Heat poses special threats to young athletes, said Dr. Thomas Pommering, medical director for Nationwide Children's Sports Medicine.

"Youth and adolescent athletes sweat less, create more heat per [body mass](#), and acclimate much slower than adults to warmer environments, putting them at greater risk for heat-related injuries in hot and humid temperatures," he said in an online post from the hospital.

Spotting heat-linked illness

There are telltale signs on the playing field (or anywhere) that someone may be overcome by the heat. Various types of heat illness include:

- **Heat cramps.** As too much sweating causes salt and water to leave the body, this can cause severe cramping in the limbs and abdomen.
- **Heat syncope.** Syncope is the medical term for fainting, which can be preceded by weakness and fatigue.
- **Heat exhaustion.** This could manifest in cool, pale skin and the onset of headache, nausea, chills, weakness, unsteadiness, dizziness, rapid pulse, excessive thirst and muscle cramps.
- **Heat stroke.** This is always an emergency. Signs of heat stroke include slurred or incoherent speech, looking disoriented, rapid/irregular pulse, seizures, unconsciousness and even coma.

As heat stroke sets in, the body's heat-control mechanism begins to fail, and that can lead to organ failure.

- **Treatment:** Take these measures immediately when heat illness strikes:
- **Cool the victim.** Move the affected person to the shade or an air-conditioned space, remove any sweat-saturated clothing, and apply ice, water, cold towels etc to their body.
- **Replace fluids.** If the victim can drink water, make sure they do and if not IV fluids should be delivered by medical professionals.

Speed is crucial

"Early recognition and intervention are key in avoiding such a situation," Pommering said in a Nationwide news release. "The treatment of [heat stroke](#) is much the same as that outlined above, except that it must happen as quickly as possible. Emergency Medical Services [911] should be activated immediately and the athlete transported to the nearest hospital for more sophisticated treatment."

Preventing heat-related illness

It's best for everyone if heat never has a chance to severely affect a young athlete in the first place. Some tips for athletes, parents and coaches generally:

- **Hydration** is key: Teach kids to pay attention to their bodies and their own thirst, and to "drink to thirst"—that is, drink enough water so that the thirst recedes. Rehydrate between sports events/practices.
- **Salt balance.** The body loses salt during heat and exertion, so this is one point in life where generously salting your food is maybe healthy, the Nationwide Children's experts said. Revert to

a lower-salt diet once the heat and exertion are no longer a factor. Eating a healthy, well-balanced diet also helps [young athletes](#) better deal with heat stress.

- **Acclimatize.** As the hot weather arrives, don't suddenly go all out on a 100-degree day. Instead, slowly build up a tolerance to heat over about two weeks to help your body acclimatize, the experts said.
- **Medications.** Be sure to check your child's medications with your pediatricians, to be sure they won't make them more sensitive to heat.

Tips for coaches:

- **Avoid the hottest hours.** Schedule practices in the morning or late afternoon/evening—11 a.m. to 3 p.m. are typically the most brutal hours, heat-wise, especially when humidity is high. Schedule in 10 minute rest breaks. On the very hottest, most humid days, consider cancelling practices altogether
- **Avoid dark clothing.** This traps heat, so athletes should ideally wear white or paler colors. In hot/[humid conditions](#), try to eliminate the need for excess layers/equipment.
- **Encourage rest breaks.** This allows athletes time to dissipate heat and take in water. Let them take off helmets, pads and other equipment during breaks. Water breaks every 15 minutes are ideal.
- **Spot the most vulnerable.** Young people who are overweight, out of shape, who sweat less and have any prior history of heat illness may need to be monitored more closely

Citation: Parents, coaches: Help young athletes avoid summer heat hazards (2024, April 22)
retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-04-parents-young-athletes-summer-hazards.html>

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