

Feeling the Heat: Hyperthermia -- How to Recognize and Treat It

Remember the 1995 Chicago heat wave? Over 600 heat-related deaths occurred in the five-day period now considered one of the worst weather-related disasters in the city's history. Even more tragically, France in August 2003 experienced a heat wave that eventually claimed almost 15,000 lives over a month's time.

In both locations, victims were predominantly elderly and many were poor. Temperatures soared to well over 100 degrees. Air conditioning was virtually non-existent for most of the casualties—in France air-conditioning is rare, while in Chicago most of the victims had units that were not working or they couldn't afford to turn them on. Many of Chicago's victims were reluctant to open windows or doors because they lived in high crime areas.

Hyperthermia caused the deaths of most of these people. Hyperthermia is a group of illnesses resulting when your body is unable to maintain a healthy balance between the amount of heat it produces and how much is lost. The brain—our thermostat—works with muscles, spinal cord, blood vessels, skin and glands to keep body temperatures balanced. When we get too warm, air passing over skin surfaces cools us and lowers body temperature. If body temperature is not reduced, symptoms of hyperthermia may result. Elderly are more at risk because chronic underlying diseases or various drug regimens reduce the body's ability to eliminate excess heat. Overweight, underweight, or alcoholism also increase risk.

These are all forms of hyperthermia, according to the National Institute on Aging:

- *Heat cramps*—muscle tightening in the stomach, arms or legs that may be a first indication of being too hot, even though body temperature is normal and skin is cool.
- *Heat edema*—swelling in ankles and feet not relieved by elevating the legs.
- *Heat syncope*—a sudden dizziness when exercising or working in hot weather.
- *Heat exhaustion*—condition of feeling nausea, thirst, weakness, heavy sweating, and loss of coordination, all signs of the body losing its' cooling ability. Skin is clammy but body temperature may be normal or elevated.
- *Heat stroke*—fainting may be the first sign, also look for high body temperature (over 104), confusion, lack of coordination, dry skin and inability to sweat.

In the case of all these conditions, drink plenty of fluids and rest in a cool place. But seek medical attention quickly for heat exhaustion and heat stroke as they may be life-threatening.

How can you prevent hyperthermia? During hot and humid weather, you can take these steps:

- Keep cool by turning on fans and air-conditioning, close drapes and shades. Open windows at night for ventilation. If you can't cool your house or apartment, go where there is air-conditioning—a friend's home, the movies or a mall.
- Avoid exerting yourself in hot weather. Take frequent breaks, drink plenty of water, and wear light, loose-fitting clothing. Avoid caffeine drinks or alcohol.

You may be eligible for a program that provides window air conditioners to seniors. Call your local area agency on aging or Eldercare Locator (1-800-677-1116) for more information.

For more information, check these websites:

- *Hyperthermia: Too Hot for Your Health*, National Institute on Aging.
www.niapublications.org/agepages/hyperther.asp
- *Hyperthermia: Too Hot for Your Health*, MedicineNet.com.
- www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=60580

###