



# Feature Column

By Dr. Fay W. Boozman, Director  
[www.healthyarkansas.com](http://www.healthyarkansas.com)

## Keeping Your Hometown Healthy Staying Cool Can Save Your Life

July 14 – July 20, 2002

Temperatures are on the rise and we are now well into summer, the time that many Arkansans spend outdoors enjoying our Natural State. We are experiencing the discomfort of hot days and humid nights that give little relief and in turn are increasing our risk to heat-related illnesses. Understanding how to protect yourself and your loved ones from these high summertime temperatures is the first step to preventing the 400 heat-related deaths that occur in the U.S. every year.

Few adult Americans will forget the heat wave of 1980. There were 153 heat-related deaths in Arkansas in that year alone. Since then, heat has caused the deaths of 246 additional Arkansans. The 1995 heat wave in the Midwest contributed to the 716 heat-related deaths in the U.S.

Our bodies are cooled primarily by losing heat through the skin and perspiration. Problems occur when we are unable to shed excess heat. When our heat gain exceeds the amount we can get rid of, our temperature begins to rise and heat-related illness may develop. While the elderly, people with health problems and very young children are the most vulnerable, heat can affect anyone - even strong, healthy athletes can be stricken. The following heat disorders are progressive and should be attended to immediately.

- **Heat cramps.** These are prolonged muscular pains caused by severe salt depletion due to

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heavy sweating. Treatment includes fluid replacement, cooling down and gentle massage.

- **Heat exhaustion.** This is the most common illness caused by heat and often occurs while the person is working outside or attending outside events in extremely hot, humid weather. With heat exhaustion, there is interference in the blood circulation to vital organs such as the brain, heart and lungs. The victim may complain of weakness and may feel faint. Other symptoms include dizziness, nausea, headache and confusion. The person should be moved to a cooler place and wet cloths applied for cooling down. Fluid and salt should be replaced. Depending on the severity of the illness, hospitalization and intravenous fluid replacement may be necessary. This condition usually comes just before heat stroke.
- **Heat stroke (also called sunstroke).** This is a life-threatening condition in which the victim's temperature-control system stops working. Sweating stops completely and the body's temperature can rise so high that the nervous system, the brain and other organs can be damaged permanently. Death may occur if the body is not cooled quickly. The symptoms of heat stroke include sudden high fever, dry skin, delirium, convulsions and seizures. Heat stroke is a severe medical emergency -- call 911 and cool the person as fast as you can by getting them indoors or in the shade. Use ice, a cold bath and wet sheets for cooling until medical help arrives.

Those who work, exercise or participate in strenuous activity, such as football practice, for an hour or more during intense heat, may lose up to two quarts of fluids per hour. If you must pursue intense activity during hot weather, follow these safety tips:

- Drink plenty of water. Fluid replacement is crucial to avoid heat risks. Drink more water than usual before exercising or working in the heat. (If you are elderly, or taking medication, ask your doctor about fluid intake recommendations.)

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- Schedule your strenuous activity during the coolest time of the day.
- Monitor how you feel. If you have difficulty maintaining your regular pace, slow down.

Elderly people are warned to avoid staying shut-up indoors during heat waves without using air conditioning. More than half of the 700 heat-related deaths in the 1995 Chicago heat wave could have been prevented with an air conditioner in the home, according to a published study. Experts say fans are apparently not effective against heat illness during intense heat waves. If you cannot afford an air conditioner for your home, spend more time in other air-conditioned environments. Access to air conditioning for even a few hours a day is protective. If you know someone who may be at-risk for heat-related problems, check on them frequently. Hot summer weather cannot be prevented, but we can decrease the risks.

Not sure about just how hot is too hot? Tune in to your local weather forecasts. They include information regarding heat index and potential health advisories.

For more information about avoiding heat disorders, contact the local American Red Cross in your community or visit the Web site at [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org). You can also call your local county health unit for additional information.

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