

Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home

A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon RN, BSN

This Summer, Keep Your Cool (and Your Health)!

Last month we talked about elder abuse and how it can happen within the family as well as in hospitals, nursing homes, or in the community. You learned some ways to recognize the signs and symptoms of elder abuse, and how to prevent it from happening in your own home.

This month you'll discover a few ways to make sure you "keep your cool" as the summer season heats up. By keeping your cool inside and outside your home, you'll help bring your health home... Not to the hospital!

We all know that summer is a great time to enjoy the outdoors, get involved in outdoor activity, and get out of that rut some of us may have gotten into during the colder, more sedentary months.

But summer also is a time when you must be even more diligent regarding your health. Summer's higher temperatures, humidity, and an often relentless bring risks that include heat, skin cancer and even tetanus. You need to be aware of these risks and how to prevent them, especially because these risks strike seniors more often than the general population.

If you tend to feel *really* hot when it's abnormally hot out, that's because seniors are disproportionately affected by long heat waves of over-90 degree temperatures with high humidity. It's not just the heat that can get you, though; age, disease and medication can increase your health risk.

Say you're taking medication for high blood pressure and heart disease. Well, you probably know that these medications are diuretics—they remove salt and fluid volume from your body. When you sweat because of the high temperatures, diuretics can lead to dehydration, which can lead to discomfort, dizziness, confusion, damage to major organs, and—in cases when not immediately attended to—trips to your local emergency room.

When we're thirsty, most healthy individuals will naturally replenish their body's fluids. But the thirst mechanisms in seniors are not as finely tuned as in younger people. And if you've suffered from a stroke, Alzheimer's or another brain disease, your thirst mechanism is even less likely to "instruct" you to drink enough fluids.

So first of all, to help prevent dehydration, you need to drink at least six 8-ounce glasses of fluid each day. In the past, you may have been told to eat salt tablets. I don't recommend you do so because they can cause more harm than good.

Secondly, remember that your bodies are not as able to regulate temperature. In addition to taking in enough fluids, make sure that your home is properly ventilated. If you don't have one already, invest in an air conditioner. The money you spend on operating it during the hottest days will be worth it!

Also be aware of your mental state: Confusion is a sign of heat exhaustion and dehydration. If you or someone you know has a fever or shows unusual behavior changes from the heat, get yourself (or your friend) to a hospital for treatment of possible heat stroke and/or dehydration.

Protect yourself from the sun's rays, particularly if you're fair-skinned or you have a history of skin cancer. The simplest way is to use sunscreen; I recommend anything with an SPF of 50 or higher. Remember: Age is a factor in many types of cancer, including skin cancers, so be on the lookout for the most common cancer, melanoma. Examine your skin for moles that change color or whose borders change, or for rough, raised areas of skin that do not heal—even after you've applied moisturizers and/or first aid creams. Have your doctor examine your body for possible skin trouble spots.

Last but not least, tetanus is an unusual but difficult-to-diagnose condition that affects seniors more than any other age group. Tetanus occurs when a microorganism, often found in soil and manure, infects an open area on the skin. If you haven't gotten your tetanus vaccine booster shot within the past ten years, schedule one. Because some of you may not have received the original series of tetanus shots as kids, you should get these first. A simple blood test can help you find out if you've had the original tetanus shots. If you're not sure, your doctor may decide it's easier to give you the complete series.

The bottom line is, enjoy the summer weather. Take walks when it's cool enough and exercise within your limits. Activities like these may improve your balance, build muscle mass, lower blood pressure, improve your cardiac health, and give you valuable emotional and physical health benefits.

Don't do too much too soon. Whether it's gardening or exercising, ease into it and gradually build your endurance. Watch the heat and your fluid intake, and you'll enjoy summer in good health.

Speaking of good health, relaxing and vacationing, I will be taking a break next month. So I've invited my good friend and colleague Dr. Robert Hansen to be your guest columnist. He'll share with you some stories and tips to prevent trips to the Emergency Room this summer.

Remember, the essence of home health care is to provide individuals, families and loved ones with services that promote maximum comfort and independence in the home.

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