

# Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home

## Heat Related Illness and Emergencies

*Guest Columnist Dr. Robert Hansen, M.D., F.A.C.E.P.*

Before we talk about this month's topic, let me first share with you some very good news: Harmon Home Health's very own Lydia Oquendo recently received a "Health Care Heroes Award" from the *Worcester Business Journal*.

Those of you who know Lydia won't be surprised by this award. When I spoke with my colleague Kim Harmon—who graciously invited me to serve as her Guest Columnist this month—she pointed out Lydia's willingness to take on extra assignments, especially the most difficult ones. She also commended Lydia's communication skills and her drive to serve patients and families.

"Lydia personifies the type of home aide seniors feel comfortable with," said Kim, adding that Lydia always takes the time to understand and listen. "By doing so, she recognizes [clients'] strengths and weaknesses.

Congratulations to Lydia and to the entire staff of Harmon Home Health. I'm proud to be associated with such dedicated professionals.

Earlier this week, while sweating through another one of my white lab coats, I reflected on one of my favorite Jane Austen quotations: "What dreadful hot weather we have! It keeps me in a continual state of inelegance."

When it comes to heat and humidity, inelegance isn't the only thing seniors have to be concerned with. In the coming summer months, our outdoor temperatures will rise into the 80's and sometimes 90's. As the mercury ascends, so do the number of heat related illnesses and emergencies with which seniors must be aware.

Heat related illnesses are directly caused by elevated outdoor (and sometimes indoor) temperatures. The most commonly known manifestations of heat illnesses include heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke; heat rash and heat syncope (passing out) are also related.

Heat exhaustion is the most common heat related illness. Heat exhaustion usually occurs in people who simply aren't used to the high temperatures. These people have usually been working or exercising outside, in elevated temperatures, when they become dehydrated. People who have heat exhaustion may show a variety of signs and symptoms. These symptoms may include heavy sweating, being pale, muscle cramps, weakness, dizziness, headache, nausea and/or vomiting. Their skin may be cool and moist, and they may have a fast heart rate. If a person who is suffering from heat exhaustion is taken out of the heat, they risk suffering from heat stroke (see below).

Heat rash, sometimes called prickly heat, is an itchy, red rash commonly seen in tropical areas, but also can be seen in the beginning of a heat wave, and in people who wear tight clothing when it is warm outside. In severe cases, heat rash can cause people to get more serious types of heat illness because it limits the body's ability to sweat.

Heat syncope is passing out or almost passing out. This usually occurs as temperatures outside become too hot for your body to adjust. Similarly, heat cramps are severe muscle cramps which occur in people who usually exercise outdoors. The cramps happen because the person has not adequately re-hydrated themselves.

Heat stroke is the most serious heat-related illness. It usually affects the very young and the very old, and develops over the course of several days. It usually happens during heat waves, and results in very severe dehydration. Heat stroke happens because your body is no longer able to control its own temperature, and the body temperature rises very rapidly. Heat stroke can cause death or permanent disability in a very short period of

time. A form of heat stroke--exertional heat stroke—can occur over the course of several hours in younger people who are exercising in severe heat.

Now that you understand the different types of heat illnesses, let's discover why seniors are more susceptible to these types of afflictions.

Several of the physiologic responses to heat, including increased cardiovascular performance, increased sweating, and increased blood flow to the skin and extremities (which helps to cool) may not occur as easily in the older person. These functions are important in temperature regulation, and fluid balance. Thus, when these processes occur at a decreased rate, heat builds up in the body, increasing the risk of illness.

Many of you are on medications. Several of these, including some common blood pressure medications, cause salt and water loss from the body, leading to dehydration. Some other medications can decrease the amount of sweat the body produces, causing an increase in body temperature. Each of these, either separate or in combination, can lead to disaster.

Cognitive diseases, or those which affect our ability to think and process information (like dementia) at times may not allow people who suffer from them to care for themselves. This is especially important during temperature extremes, where the ability to cool oneself, and to remain well hydrated are the keys to coping with the heat.

What can you do to make sure you don't suffer from heat illnesses? Let's reiterate the most important points from Kim's column last month:

- Stay cool. Find air conditioning, or at least a cool room in your house. As long as the temperature in the room is cooler than your body, you will lose heat, which is good!
- Stay hydrated. Try to drink enough water every day, not just when you feel thirsty. I see many older people in the emergency department who are dehydrated. They (or their family) tell me that they drink 1 cup of coffee or tea a day, and that they don't want to drink more. Well, when it gets warm out, drinking enough fluids could mean the difference between life and death. So drink up!
- Don't overdo it. As you have seen, many heat related illness occurs because of exertion during the hot weather. If you like to be outdoors in the summer, gradually build up your tolerance for the heat (acclimatization).
- Be social. Check on your neighbor, especially during the hot weather. Set up a phone network to check on friends and family. Several local police departments even have computer systems which check on older people by phone every day.

Kim will return next month with a blockbuster column! 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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