

Exertional Heat Illness

Summer is a great time to get outside and enjoy the beautiful weather and longer daylight hours. However, exercising in the heat can cause a variety of problems from mild but painful muscle cramps to life threatening heatstroke. Fortunately there are several steps you can take to help you run safely through the summer months.

Heat related illness occurs when your body becomes overheated and does not have the water and salt that it needs to function properly. This leads to a reduction in your exercise endurance, decrease in your time to complete exhaustion and an increase in your body temperature.



There are three main forms of heat illness; muscle cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke. While muscle cramps are painful they are not dangerous and will get better by hydrating and eating some salty snacks. Heat exhaustion can feel much worse and will take longer to recover from but is also generally not dangerous. Heatstroke on the other hand can be fatal, but fortunately is rare and can be avoided.

The most important way to prevent heat exhaustion and heatstroke is to understand the situations, signs and symptoms of heat illness and take action as soon as possible.

Endurance exercise lasting over an hour in hot humid weather is the most dangerous situation since this can lead to the highest levels of sweating and dehydration. But heat and humidity are relative terms. If you are used to exercising in cooler, drier climates, even a moderately warm and humid atmosphere could be dangerous. Finally not being physically fit, just starting an exercise regimen, being ill or dehydrated all increase your risk of heat illness. Understanding these circumstances can allow you plan ahead and prevent any symptoms before they start.

Even the best prevention plans fail so it is important to understand the symptoms of heat exhaustion so they don't progress to heatstroke. Profound fatigue, headache, irritability and dizziness are good first signs that something is going wrong. Immediate rest, hydration and cooling yourself with a cold bath or shower will help reduce symptoms and keep you safe. If these progress to disorientation, confusion or unusual behavior things are starting to get serious. At this point medical intervention by trained personnel is recommended.

Ultimately, being prepared, hydrated and knowing your surroundings should be all you need to exercise intensely but safely.



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