



University of North Carolina Wilmington
Abrons Student Health Center

INSTRUCTION SHEET: HEAT EXHAUSTION AND HEATSTROKE

The Student Health Provider has diagnosed heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Heat-related illnesses, such as heat exhaustion and heatstroke, occur when your body cannot keep itself cool. As the air temperature rises, your body stays cool when your sweat evaporates. On hot, humid days, the evaporation of sweat is slowed by the increased moisture in the air. When sweating isn't enough to cool your body, your body temperature rises, and you may become ill.

Heat Exhaustion happens when your body gets too hot. It can be caused by exercise or hot weather. You may feel weak, dizzy or worried. You also may have a headache, muscle weakness or cramps, think you have heat exhaustion, and get out of the heat quickly. You get dehydrated and have very little urine. Drink plenty of water or other fluids. Do NOT drink alcohol. Alcohol can make heat exhaustion worse. If you do not feel better within 30 minutes, you should contact your doctor or the Student Health Center. If heat exhaustion is not treated, it can progress to heat stroke.

Heatstroke can happen when your body gets too hot, or it can happen after heat exhaustion. Heatstroke is much more serious than heat exhaustion. Heatstroke can kill you. People with heatstroke may seem confused. They may have seizures or go into a coma. Most people with heatstroke also have a fever. If you think someone has heatstroke, you should take him or her to a cool, shady place quickly, and call a doctor or 911. Removing the person's unnecessary clothing can help cool him or her down. Get medical help right away if you (or someone else) have skin that feels hot and dry but not sweaty, confusion or loss of consciousness, frequent vomiting, and shortness of breath or trouble breathing. Having heat exhaustion or heatstroke makes you more sensitive to hot conditions for about a week afterwards. Be especially careful not to exercise too hard, and avoid hot weather. Ask your doctor or the Student Health Center to tell you when it is safe to return to normal activities. Be aware that some **medications** can put you in danger of heatstroke, such as medications for: allergies, cough and cold, high blood pressure or heart conditions, limb swelling. If you could be taking any of these medications, you should be extra careful about your exposure to high heat and humidity. Tell your doctor what medicines you are taking. He or she can tell you if your medicine puts you in danger of heatstroke.

The **heat index** tells you how it **feels** outside in the shade. It is not the same as the outdoor temperature. The heat index is a measurement of how hot it feels when relative humidity is combined with the effects of the air temperature. When you are standing in full sunshine, the heat index value is even higher. A heat index of 90 degrees or above is dangerous. When the heat index is high, stay indoors in air-conditioned areas when possible. If you must go outside, take the following precautions: wear lightweight, light-colored, loose-fitting clothes. Protect yourself from the sun by wearing a hat or using an umbrella. Use sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or more. Drink fewer beverages that contain caffeine (such as tea, coffee and cola) or alcohol. Schedule vigorous outdoor activities for cooler times of the day—before 10 a.m. and after 6 p.m. During an outdoor activity, take frequent breaks. Drink water or other fluids every 15 to 20 minutes, even if you don't feel thirsty. If you have clear, pale urine, you are probably drinking enough fluids. If you have a chronic medical problem, ask your doctor about how to deal with the heat, about drinking extra fluids and about your medicines.

This information was adapted from www.familydoctor.org, an excellent patient education website by the American Academy of Family Physicians.