Most of us would like spring to last for more than a week or two, but believe it or not, the hot weather is here. And while sitting outside and ‘soaking up the sun’ seems like a pleasant way to spend the day, remember that heat can be deadly, especially for those of us over 60 years of age.

What is hot weather?
The temperature the thermometer reads is not the only way weathermen define heat. They have created a Heat Index, which combines the temperature and the humidity reading to create a ‘misery index.’ The temperature may be 100 degrees, but when it is combined with high humidity, the Heat Index may be higher and enter a danger zone in which people can develop medical problems. These symptoms can range from nausea and vomiting, weakness and dizziness to fainting and collapse or death.

Who is Most Likely to Suffer?
While many groups are at risk for heat-related symptoms, there are a few special groups who are at high risk. Unfortunately, that includes senior citizens, patients with certain medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and those taking certain medications.

Heat Exhaustion
People can suffer a heat-related illness when their body’s temperature system is overloaded. The body sweats because it is hot, but the sweat doesn’t evaporate because of high humidity. The evaporation of sweat is how we cool ourselves. The most common heat-related illness is heat exhaustion. This condition can occur over several days in a hot environment. Heat exhaustion can occur even if you’re not physically active. The symptoms can include heavy sweating, turning pale, muscle cramps, weakness, nausea or vomiting, fainting, cool, clammy skin, fast breathing, or headache.

As you can see many of the symptoms can occur in many people, but during a hot spell, if you develop any of these symptoms which are unusual for you and they are not going away, please remember to call your doctor.

Heatstroke
If someone having heat exhaustion doesn’t get medical treatment, it can progress to heatstroke, also known as sunstroke. This is very serious. Heatstroke occurs when the body cannot control its temperature anymore and the body’s temperature rockets to 106 degrees or higher. This can cause permanent brain damage or death if not treated immediately. The symptoms of heatstroke can include extremely high body temperature of 103 degrees (by oral thermometer) or more, red, hot, dry skin (lack of sweating), a rapid, pounding pulse, throbbing headache, confusion, and unconsciousness. So if someone faints or stops making sense or acting strange, call 911 immediately.
Heat Cramps
Heat cramps are due to muscle spasms, usually in the abdomen, arms or legs. This is usually a result of so much sweating that the body is low on sodium or salt. People on a low-sodium diet or with heart problems need to be very aware of this and should seek medical attention right away if the cramps last more than an hour.

Heat Rash
This is more common in youngsters, but anyone can get it. Heat rash is an irritation of the skin that comes from excessive sweating. Common areas that develop heat rash are the neck, upper chest, groin, under the breasts, and in elbow creases. The solution is to keep the area clean and dry. Avoid using creams because they can form a barrier keeping the area moist and hot, making the rash worse.

Remember, staying safe in high temperatures is relatively simple: Don't take chances when it is hot outside.

Source: Web MD and Senior Health Primary Care Staff

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Tips for Staying Healthy During Hot Weather

- Drink a lot of fluids, even if you aren't thirsty.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, or sugared sodas because they can make fluid leave your body faster. Don't skimp on water. If you are outside a lot in even 90 degrees, you can lose a half gallon of water in 10 minutes.
- Stay indoors if at all possible. Avoid ice-cold drinks as they can cause stomach cramping.
- Go to a mall, movie, or friend's or relative's home if your air-conditioning goes out. See if there are heat-relief shelters nearby for the night.
- Don’t insist on doing your usual exercise routine, thinking the danger is not real.
- Buy a fan to move air around, even if it's air-conditioned air. Remember, air-conditioning is best above 90 degrees.
- Wear light-colored, loose clothing. Don't overwrap babies; put a shade over them instead.
- If you go out, do it early or after dark.
- Cut down on exercise.
- Don't assume you are immune to heat outside just because you never had a problem before.
- Stay in the shade.
- Don't take salt tablets unless advised by a doctor.
- Move slowly.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat.
- Check on elderly neighbors or relatives.
- Give pets plenty of water or bring them inside.
- Don't leave animals or people in a closed car.
- Tune into weather broadcasts for the latest heat advisory or alert and heed it!
- Wet a paper towel or hankie and drape it on your face when you come inside. Other “hot spots” to place a cool compress for quick cooling include the back of your neck, underarms, and groin area.