



NEWS RELEASE

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Heat leads to at least six deaths in Alabama this summer, precautions urged

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Alabama Department of Public Health advises the public to be alert to the warning signals of heat illnesses. Between June and mid-August at least six persons ranging from preschool age to their 80s have been confirmed to have died from heat-related causes in Alabama.

Heat-related illnesses occur when a person's temperature control system is unable to properly cool itself. The body normally cools itself by sweating, but when a person's temperature rises rapidly the body cannot cool down. Very high temperatures may damage the brain or other vital organs. When humidity is high, sweat will not evaporate as fast, preventing the body from releasing heat quickly. Conditions that place individuals at higher risk are obesity, heart disease, poor circulation, a history of stroke, sunburn and prescription drug or alcohol use.

Each year there are heat-related deaths reported in Alabama. According to the Alabama Center for Health Statistics, the total numbers of deaths in recent years are as follows: 2009, 3; 2008, 8, 2007, 13. During the heat wave of 1980 there were 125 heat-related deaths recorded in the state.

"Additional precautions need to be taken by individuals who are working in jobs such as roofers or those who have extended physical activity during the heat of the day, such as runners," said Jim McVay, Dr.P.A., director of the Bureau of Health Promotion and Chronic Disease.

"Everyone must be alert to the warnings that may signal help is needed."

Heat stroke, sometimes called sunstroke, is the most serious heat-related illness. It occurs when the body becomes unable to control its temperature. The body's temperature rises rapidly, the sweating mechanism fails, and the body is unable to cool down. Body temperature may rise to 106 degrees F or higher within 10 to 15 minutes. Heat stroke can cause death or permanent disability if emergency treatment is not provided.

Warning signs of heat stroke vary, but include the following:

- Extremely high body temperature (above 103 degrees F)
- Red, hot and dry skin (no sweating)
- Rapid, strong pulse
- Throbbing headache

- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Confusion
- Unconsciousness

Heat stroke is a life-threatening emergency, so have another person call 911 for medical assistance and take immediate steps to begin cooling the victim in any of the following ways:

Get the person to a shady area, cool rapidly in a tub of cool water, place in a cool shower, spray with cool water from a garden hose, splash with cool water, or, if the humidity is low, place in a cool, wet sheet and fan vigorously. Monitor body temperature and continue cooling efforts until the person's body temperature drops to 101 to 102 degrees F. If emergency medical personnel are delayed, call a hospital emergency room for further instructions.

A person with heat stroke is likely to be unconscious or unresponsive, so he or she cannot safely consume any liquids. Under no circumstances should you give any alcohol to a person with heat stroke or any heat illness."

Follow these preventive measures to avoid heat illnesses:

- Drink more fluids, and avoid beverages containing alcohol or caffeine
- When temperatures are extreme, stay indoors, ideally in an air-conditioned place
- Take a cool shower or bath, and reduce or eliminate strenuous activities during the hottest time of the day
- Protect yourself from the sun with a wide-brimmed hat, light-colored, loose-fitting clothing and use a sunscreen of SPF 15 or higher
- Never leave pets or people in a parked vehicle.

For more information, visit www.adph.org.