Central Massachusetts
Regional Public Health Alliance

GRAFTON · HOLDEN · LEICESTER · MILLBURY · SHREWSBURY · WEST BOYLSTON · WORCESTER

PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT

As dangerous heat conditions spread throughout the region today and are forecasted to continue through the weekend, the Central MA Regional Public Health Alliance is issuing the following Public Health Alert. To protect your health when temperatures are extremely high, residents are being urged to take the appropriate precautions to avoid heat related emergencies.

Conditions of extreme heat are defined as summertime temperatures that are substantially hotter and/or more humid than average for location at that time of year. Humid or muggy conditions, which add to the discomfort of high temperatures, occur when a "dome" of high atmospheric pressure traps hazy, damp air near the ground. Summertime activity, whether on the playing field or the construction site, must be balanced with measures that aid the body's cooling mechanisms and prevent heat-related illness.

“Individuals suffer heat-related illness when their bodies are unable to compensate and properly cool themselves,” stated Michael Hirsh, M.D. Medical Director of Public Health. “Several factors affect the body's ability to cool itself during extremely hot weather. When the humidity is high, sweat will not evaporate as quickly, preventing the body from releasing heat quickly. In such cases, a person's body temperature rises rapidly and individuals are in extreme danger of becoming very ill.”

The elderly, the very young, and people with mental illness and chronic diseases are at highest risk. However, even young and healthy individuals can succumb to heat if they participate in strenuous physical activities during hot weather. Air-conditioning is the number one protective factor against heat-related illness and death. If a home is not air-conditioned, people can reduce their risk for heat-related illness by spending time in public facilities that are air-conditioned.

TIPS TO PREVENT HEAT RELATED ILLNESS

- Never leave infants, children or the frail elderly unattended in a parked car.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Don’t wait until you’re thirsty.
- Dress in lightweight, loose-fitting clothing. Use a hat and sunscreen as needed.
- Drink fruit juice or a sports beverage to replace salts and minerals lost during heavy sweating. (If a client/resident is on a low-sodium diet, check with his/her physician first.)
- During the hottest parts of the day, keep physical activities to a minimum and stay indoors in air-conditioning and out of the sun.
- Use fans as needed.
- Open windows to allow fresh air to circulate when appropriate.
- Use cool compresses, misting, showers and baths.
- Avoid hot foods and heavy meals—they add heat to the body. Eat frozen treats.

Heat Stroke and Heat Exhaustion

Heat stroke—which occurs when the body can't control its temperature—may result in disability or death if emergency treatment is not given. Heat exhaustion occurs when the body loses a large amount of water and salt contained in sweat.

Warning signs of heat stroke vary, but may include:

- An extremely high body temperature (above 103 degrees Fahrenheit, orally)
- Unconsciousness
- Dizziness, nausea and confusion
- Red, hot and dry skin (no sweating)
- Rapid, strong pulse
- Throbbing headache

Warning signs of heat exhaustion vary, but may include:

- Heavy sweating
- Weakness
- Headache
- Nausea or vomiting
- Paleness, tiredness, dizziness
- Muscle cramps

WHAT TO DO

If you see any of these signs for heat stroke or heat exhaustion, you may be dealing with a life-threatening emergency and should do the following:

- Have someone call 911 while you begin cooling the victim.
- Get the victim to a shady area.
- Cool the victim rapidly with a cool bath or shower, or by sponging with cool water, until body temperature drops to 101-102 degrees Fahrenheit, orally.
- If emergency medical personnel are delayed, call the hospital emergency room for further instructions.
- Do not give the victim alcohol to drink.
- Again, get medical assistance as soon as possible.

If a victim's muscles twitch uncontrollably as a result of heat stroke, keep the victim from injuring him/herself, but do not place any object in the mouth and do not give fluids. If there is vomiting, make sure the airway remains open by turning the victim on his/her side.

For additional information on heat emergencies contact your local Department of Public Health. In the case of a heat emergency contact 911 immediately.