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# News

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**\*\*Tips for low-income elderly on how to avoid heatstroke.**

DALLAS—The effects of heat on the body add up. Many people have the wrong idea that if they don't have air conditioning, they should stay in the hot environment and not go from one temperature to another.

"If these people would cool off just once a day, it would help -- it could save their lives," says Dr. James Knochel, professor and vice chairman of Internal Medicine at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas and head of the medicine service at Dallas Veterans Administration Medical Center.

Knochel, a nationally recognized expert on the effects of heat in the environment, has some specific ideas on how the low-income elderly without home air conditioning can avoid heatstroke.

- \*Go to an air-conditioned shopping mall and sit for a couple of hours a day.

- \*Go out in the yard early in the morning or late in the evening when it's cool.

- \*Drink plenty of water.

- \*Wear light clothing. Sometimes elderly people wear long underwear and sweaters in the summer because they are afraid of catching cold, says Knochel.

- \*Use a fan. Ernie Taft, emergency preparedness specialist for the City of Dallas, says many low-income people hesitate to use electric fans because of the cost of electricity. But running a fan costs only one-half cent per hour.

- \*Take frequent baths in lukewarm or cool water. Or just wet your face and arms, says Knochel. "And don't stay in a steamy bathroom."

- \*"They need air movement," he says. It's best to open windows, but many of the elderly are afraid to open their windows for fear someone will break in. Taft says in many homes the windows have been nailed shut, and the resident is physically unable to get them open. He suggests that a person in that situation call a neighbor or a local church and ask for help in getting the windows open.

Taft also adds other suggestions for air-conditioned places to go to cool off: movies, public libraries and city recreation centers. If it is necessary to spend the night in an air-conditioned facility, the elderly may call the Salvation Army at 742-9074. If they have other needs and don't know who to call, they may contact the Dallas County Community Action Committee at 742-2500. He also suggests that many churches are responsive to the needs of the low-income elderly.

Since this is an "average summer" by National Weather Service definition, the Emergency Preparedness Office has no formal program for the city. But Taft cautions, "Many of our elderly people have lived here for a long time, and they take the heat for granted. They need to realize that they should avoid exertion in the heat and take care of themselves."

(over)



Knochel praised Parkland Memorial Hospital for the handling of heatstroke emergencies there. "They are better equipped there than in many other cities. People here know about heat. And at Parkland all new interns are lectured on their first day about four emergencies: heart attack, GI (gastrointestinal) bleeding, shock and heatstroke. When they see a heatstroke patient, they know what to do immediately.

"In the summer of 1980, Parkland's heatstroke survival rate was as good as the average in young kids. And they were dealing with people who weighed 300 pounds or were diabetic, people who were already sick.

"And it's not just the people at Parkland. The paramedics (City of Dallas Fire Department) know what to do, too."

Patients in nursing homes are also a focus of concern for Knochel. "Personnel in nursing homes should keep in mind that body water loss increases when the temperature rises. And many old people may not be able to express that they are thirsty. Personnel should make sure that they get plenty of water and that their rooms are no hotter than 80 degrees (F.)."

People in heatstroke are in coma; that is, they are unresponsive to any external stimulation. Sweating usually ceases, so their skin is dry, flushed and extremely hot to touch. Body temperature is usually more than 106 degrees. "If their temperature reaches 108 degrees, the heat starts altering proteins, which is what the whole body is made of," says Knochel. "What happens is every tissue and organ -- including the brain -- gets cooked. At that temperature you are likely to have permanent brain damage."

Untreated, heatstroke is always fatal.

First aid for heatstroke is to lower the body temperature as quickly as possible. "Your first inclination might be to call an ambulance. But the victim could die before the ambulance gets there," says Knochel.

Get the victim out of the sun, remove his clothes and douse him with water. Use a piece of his clothing or whatever is available to fan him. The goal is to imitate the sweating mechanism. As sweat evaporates from the skin, it cools the body.

This technique could save the victim's life before the ambulance arrives.

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