

News

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****Most Fourth of July health and safety hazards easier to prevent than to cure

DALLAS--If it's a typical Fourth of July, there will be fun in the sun and fireworks after the sun goes down, picnics and pool parties, heat exhaustion and drownings, sunburn and bug bites, food poisoning and feet sliced up by lawnmower blades.

The biggest tragedy of all may be that most summertime disasters could be prevented.

Drownings and near-drownings--which can cause irreversible brain damage--are "absolutely preventable tragedies," said Dr. Michael Krentz, chairman of Emergency Medicine in the Department of Surgery at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

The vast majority of drownings and near-drownings involve infants and toddlers who can't swim and wander into a pool, said Krentz. "Turning your attention away from a child to answer the phone can be all it takes."

The emergency medicine professor offered these tips for preventing water tragedies:

- * Be sure that young children are watched constantly when they have

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access to a pool.

- * Make sure pools are secured so that no child has access from the yard or the house without adult supervision.

- * Parents should know CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation). Classes are offered by the Red Cross and the American Heart Association.

- * Adults are wise to avoid alcohol when participating in water activities, since alcohol is directly related to many adult drownings.

- * Call 911 for immediate assistance with any water emergency.

Here are Dr. Krentz's tips for dealing with summertime health hazards.

HEAT/DEHYDRATION

A heat attack can take two forms: heat exhaustion, which actually is dehydration, and heat stroke, in which the body's internal temperature shoots up precipitously to 106 degrees Fahrenheit or higher.

Dehydration can be dangerous and must be treated; heat stroke is a medical emergency.

"Most people just don't understand how much fluid they're losing through sweating and evaporation," said Krentz. Infants, the elderly or physically debilitated are especially at risk, as are people new to Texas, who may not understand the combined effects of heat and humidity.

"If you wait for your body to tell you you're in trouble, you've waited too long," the physician added.

- * Drink extra fluids--an eight ounce glass of water every 30 to 60 minutes is a good rule of thumb. Don't wait until you feel thirsty.

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- * Avoid alcohol. It's a diuretic that makes you lose more fluid.

- * Wear light-colored, loose-fitting clothing. Light colors reflect the heat and loose garments allow the heat your body generates to dissipate.

- * Use a fan. Even warm air moving over your body helps dissipate heat. In the days before air conditioning, people sometimes put blocks of ice in front of their fans.

- * If an infant's eyes and fontanelle (the soft spot on the top of the head) appear sunken, the skin is hot and dry, the tongue and mucous membranes are dry, and the infant isn't producing urine (diapers remain dry), or if an adult stops sweating and produces no or just a little dark, strong, concentrated urine, seek immediate medical help.

SUNBURN

Like dehydration, "you're going to see it and feel it later than you get it," said Krentz. "If you wait until you're red and hurting, you've waited too long."

- * Use a sunscreen appropriate for your skin type. Fair-skinned people need more protection, but everyone needs sunscreen.

- * Take special care to keep infants and young children out of the sun. A baby or toddler can't tell you when he or she is getting burned.

CRITTERS

Fire ant bites can cause a severe skin reaction and should be washed off promptly with soap and water. Bee stings can be extremely

painful and even life-threatening to people who are allergic to them.

Most spiders are not poisonous. The two poisonous spiders found in Texas are the brown recluse, nicknamed "the fiddler" because of a violin-shaped marking on its thorax, and the black widow with a red hour-glass marking. The bite of the brown recluse, which typically hides in woodpiles, storage sheds, rafters and other dark, enclosed places, generally is not painful but causes a localized, spreading skin reaction. The black widow's bite is intensely painful and affects the entire body. There is an effective antitoxin for the black widow.

Neither a brown recluse nor a black widow bite normally is life-threatening to a healthy adult. Infants and small children, the elderly or physically debilitated are at greater risk. Anyone bitten by either kind of spider should:

- * Stay calm.

- * If you kill the spider, try not to mutilate it. If you smash it and obliterate the markings, it will be harder to know what kind of spider bite to treat.

- * Apply an ice pack to ease pain and slow absorption of the toxin.

- * Seek medical attention. Don't panic, but don't ignore it either.

LAWNMOWER SAFETY

- * Wear shoes.

- * Don't put your hands or feet anywhere near the blades.

- * Go over the rules of lawnmower safety with children before allowing them to use a mower, and supervise them closely.

FOOD POISONING

"Once again, prevention is the key. Properly refrigerate foods. Don't leave meats, dairy products or mayonnaise-based dishes such as potato salad out all afternoon or evening. Food poisoning actually is not as common as some people think. Often people who think they've got food poisoning have simply got a bad case of overindulgence."

ALCOHOL-RELATED ACCIDENTS

"Limit your alcohol consumption. Stay in control. We see more alcohol-related accidents than any other kind in the emergency room on a holiday like the Fourth of July, and I don't just mean automobile accidents."

FIREWORKS

"The best way to avoid injuries from fireworks is not to play with them. Watch the public fireworks displays. That's what they're there for."

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School.