

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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UT SOUTHWESTERN PHYSICIANS OFFER TIPS FOR SUMMER SAFETY

DALLAS – July 24, 2002 – Doctors at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas have a few health tips for keeping your summer safe and cool.

INSECT REPELLANT

As West Nile virus moves rapidly across the United States, doctors are recommending that people be more cautious about the mosquitoes buzzing around.

Mosquitoes infected with West Nile virus can pass the disease to humans. While human infection is rare, some people exposed to the virus suffer mild-to-moderate flu-like symptoms.

Dr. Elizabeth Race, an infectious diseases specialist at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, recommends using an insect repellent with a low percentage of DEET in it. A recent study found these insect repellents more effective than other repellents at keeping mosquitoes and other insects away. Parents should make sure the DEET percentage is low, Race says.

“Also, wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts when outdoors this summer, and avoid being outside at dawn or dusk when mosquitoes are most active,” she says.

OVER-THE-COUNTER MEDICATIONS

Some over-the-counter medications can make the summer heat more dangerous. Antihistamines, found in cold and allergy medicines, can make the body sweat less, potentially accelerating heat-related illnesses.

“These medications cause the mucus membranes in the body to dry up and actually cause you to sweat less,” says Dr. Greene Shepherd, clinical toxicologist at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas and director of the North Texas Poison Center. “Since sweat is one of the body’s first defenses against heat, this could be serious.”

Diuretics and some diet pills can also be potential sources of problems. These drugs make you shed water faster than normal, either by increased urination or sweating. On hot days, this makes the body more prone to dehydration.

Shepherd recommends people taking these medications be extra cautious during the summer by avoiding strenuous exercise in the heat of the day, drinking plenty of water and watching for the danger signs of heat-related injuries.

ALCOHOL AND DROWNING

Water recreational activities and alcohol don’t mix, according to emergency doctors at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

Alcohol combined with water recreation is a factor in about half of the adult drownings in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Dr. Paul Pepe, chairman of emergency medicine, says it’s important to understand the dangers alcohol consumption can pose, especially near the water.

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"Drownings are preventable events," says Pepe. "When people drink alcohol, their judgment and inhibitions are impaired. That is a dangerous situation – especially near water."

Pepe suggests teaching your children early about the dangers of water and alcohol by never drinking alcohol before or during swimming or boating, and never drinking while supervising children near the water.

HEAT AND HUMIDITY

Before you head outside this summer, you might want to check more than just the thermometer to be sure you'll be safe.

Dr. Gary Reed, professor of internal medicine at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, warns that humidity and how adjusted your body is to the heat can also play a role in heat-related injuries.

"Physical activity in a hot environment with no wind movement and 100 percent relative humidity is very dangerous and leads to many heat-related illnesses seen in the United States every year," he says. "However, it is well known that many persons are able to work outside in a very hostile environment with high humidity and hot temperatures without suffering significant heat illness."

Reed says this is due to a process called acclimatization, whereby the body adapts to the heat. If temperatures rise slowly over a period of time, Reed says, heat strokes are less common because people have adjusted. In a sudden heat wave, however, heat-related injuries are more common because there is not sufficient time for bodies to adjust.

During hot weather Reed suggests that people drink plenty of fluids, have fans or some other means of creating air currents available and avoid strenuous physical activity.

DRUGS

Cocaine, even in small amounts, can be fatal when taken in warm environments like outdoors in hot summer weather, crowded nightclubs or all-night dance parties.

Researchers at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas recently found that cocaine elevates body temperature by impairing the body's ability to increase skin-blood flow, to sweat and to perceive excessive heat stress.

"Individuals who abuse cocaine, especially in hot temperatures while participating in recreational sports or attending rave parties, won't perceive they are hot and are, therefore, less likely to drink water or to find cooler conditions," says UT Southwestern assistant professor of internal medicine Dr. Craig Crandall, who published the findings in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. "The hyperthermic effects of cocaine are greatly amplified when the drug is used under these conditions. This may result in serious heat-related injuries, including heat cramps, heat exhaustion, heat stroke and ultimately death."

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