

Avoid the heat and keep your cool this summer

As temperatures begin to soar over summer Hunter New England Health is urging people to be careful and avoid the risks of heat exhaustion, dehydration and sun burn.

Public Health Physician Dr David Durrheim is asking the public to stay on the lookout for symptoms of heat exhaustion, which include nausea, faintness, dizziness, loss of appetite, weakness, headache, and vomiting.

“If any of these symptoms occur, the person should lie down and cool, wet towels should be applied around their neck and under their arms. They should be encouraged to drink cool fluids,” Dr Durrheim said.

“If the person does not respond to treatment or has severe symptoms such as confusion or if they collapse, an ambulance should be immediately called.”

The body operates within a core temperature range of about 37-39°C. Normally, the body maintains a healthy core temperature by increasing heat loss through sweating. When the ambient temperature is high, there is high humidity or a person is dehydrated, the ability of the body to regulate its own temperature is impaired and the body can become 'overheated'.

Dr Durrheim also reminded the public that the elderly and people with existing health complications are the most susceptible to heat-related illnesses.

“Elderly people may have underlying heart or respiratory conditions, reduced fitness, compromised sweating ability, and are often more socially isolated.”

“The elderly, the very young and people who are mentally ill or disabled all have a reduced capacity to ‘self manage’ by maintaining fluids and finding a cool environment,” Dr Durrheim said.

“People with existing diseases or sicknesses such as heart problems, diabetes or hypertension should also take extra caution in this heat.”

Dr Durrheim said other people who may be at risk of heat exhaustion include outdoor workers, people in workplaces with inadequate cooling systems and workers involved in strenuous physical activities.

Long car trips during the holiday period can also pose heat-related health problems, according to Dr Durrheim.

“During long car trips there is a tendency to forget to stay hydrated. Stopping for a drink, having one in the car, and regulating the car’s temperature are important if you are driving a long way in the heat.”

Dr Durrheim said it is also vital people keep in mind that the heat generated by a closed car can be fatal for children.

“Never leave children or animals in a parked car unattended,” Dr Durrheim said.

Below are Hunter New England Health’s heat safety tips:

- Consume plenty of water, preferably every 15-20 minutes, to stay well hydrated
- Avoid drinking alcohol, sugary or caffeine drinks, which can increase dehydration
- Feed breastfed infants more frequently to help keep up their fluids
- Don’t leave children or pets in cars as they can get very hot very quickly
- Keep as cool as possible by wearing light, loose, comfortable clothing
- Keep out of the sun in the warmest part of the day – between 11am and 3pm – preferably in an air-conditioned environment
- Avoid outdoor exercise or strenuous physical activity, especially in the middle of the day
- Don’t forget to cover up when in the sun, wear a shirt, sunscreen and hat