

# Caregiving Corner

Resources & Solutions for Caregivers

## Summer Safety Tips

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As the temperatures start to rise this summer, so do the number of older adults who are at risk for a variety of seasonal illnesses. Don't think allergies – these risks are related to humidity, the daily UV index reading, and the hot, hot temperatures. Dehydration, heat exhaustion, melanoma, and heat stroke are just some of the serious, yet preventable illnesses that seniors can fall prey to during the next few months. There are several things that older adults, and their caregivers, can do to protect themselves or their loved ones from the damaging effects of heat.

One of the most common causes of hospitalization among seniors during the summer months is dehydration. Over the course of our lifetime, our bodies change from being 78% water to only 50% water. While this dehydration occurs over a period of time, it does indicate the reduction in water intake that is more prevalent in older adults. By simply adding a glass of water to normal consumption each day, especially in the summer, seniors can prevent the accelerated dehydration that often leads to hospitalization. Dehydration is important to prevent because the body uses up essential energy to combat the loss of water. This can cause weakness and lead to the onset or prolongation of disease.

If you are a caregiver, keep in mind that you should always encourage water drinking when you are around your aging loved one. A person's sensation of thirst declines with age and, therefore, some seniors

may believe they are properly hydrated simply because they do not feel thirsty.

Another heat-related concern for seniors is heat stroke – a condition that can be helped by proper hydration. Heat stroke occurs as the body overheats and is unable to stabilize its temperature. Though it can be fatal, heat stroke is preventable. Caregivers should keep these symptoms in mind as serious indicators of heat stroke: red, hot skin with no sweating, nausea, dizziness, rapid pulse, heavy sweating with cold skin, and intense headache. To prevent these symptoms, caregivers should make sure that they do the following: (1) encourage seniors to stay indoors with the air conditioning when the temperature reaches 90 degrees; (2) if no air conditioning is available, get to a place that has it such as a mall or a library; (3) drink more if you are sweating and replenish minerals with sport drinks.

Heat exhaustion has similar symptoms to heat stroke and is actually the precursor to heat stroke. When a person begins to experience signs of heat exhaustion such as muscle cramps, fatigue, weakness, or fainting, you should do one of the following to lower your body temperature: go indoors to an air conditioned environment, drink cold fluids, or take a cool shower. As with any medical problem, caregivers should call for help immediately if symptoms seem serious or if interventions do not cause the symptoms to subside.

The most deadly problem for seniors in the summer months is melanoma. It is

cited as the deadliest summer-related problem due to the fact that a person's exposure to the sun's rays over time increase their chances of developing melanoma. Though melanoma does develop over many years, there are a number of summer safety tips that will limit exposure to the sun and help reduce any person's risk for melanoma. Covering as much of your skin as possible with loose-fitting clothing reduces the amount of skin exposed, and it also helps your body maintain its temperature. Wearing a wide-brimmed hat to shield your face and neck will also have the same benefits. Doctors also recommend slowing down to avoid overexertion during particularly hot times and also (something that we all know!) wear sunscreen!

Help your loved ones combat the heat this summer and seek advice from physicians on the optimum hydration levels as well as other health conditions that may be present that can be aggravated by the summer heat. As always, moderation is key – don't avoid the outdoors, but know and appreciate your body's natural limits.