



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

Chill Out

Heat-Related Illness and Death – New York City, 2000-2011

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[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Dr. Gaynes] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly feature of the *MMWR*, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Dr. Robert Gaynes.

The dog days of summer are here and with them come the health risks caused by hot weather. Heat exposure causes more deaths in the U.S. than any other type of extreme weather.

Dr. Thomas Matte is an Assistant Commissioner with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. He's joining us today by telephone to discuss precautions that we can take to avoid heat-related illness. Welcome to the show, Tom.

[Dr. Matte] I'm glad to be with you, Bob.

[Dr. Gaynes] Tom, how many people in the U.S. die from heat exposure each year?

[Dr. Matte] Well, the number will vary each year, depending on how hot the summer is across the country but, on average, more than 600 people die each year where heat exposure is recognized as the main or an important contributing cause of death. In addition to these deaths, we know that daily deaths from other causes, like heart and lung disease, can increase during heat waves.

[Dr. Gaynes] Well, what groups are most vulnerable to heat-related illness?

[Dr. Matte] Well, the first group are people who are less able to tolerate high temperatures, so that would include seniors, people who have chronic physical or serious mental health problems, and also people who take certain medications that can interfere with the body's ability to maintain a safe body temperature. Also, people who don't have air conditioning at home or they don't use air conditioning, so they're unable to get relief from hot weather. And then, finally, we worry about people who are socially isolated because, if they do get too hot, they are less likely to have help staying cool or getting medical treatment for heat illness. I also would mention that in cities like New York—big cities—it can get hotter because of a phenomenon called the “urban heat island.” So people in cities can be more vulnerable.

[Dr. Gaynes] Well, what are some symptoms and signs of heat-related illness?

[Dr. Matte] When people begin to develop heat illness, they'll have some warning signs, like heavy sweating; they may feel light headed or have muscle cramps or become a little nauseous. If the heat illness gets more serious, they can become confused, lethargic, or

maybe even unconscious. And, even though it's hot, rather than sweating and having hot skin, they may have dry skin or cold, clammy skin. Vomiting or rapid or labored breathing are also signs of serious heat illness.

[Dr. Gaynes] Well, what should a person do if they or someone they know appears to be suffering from a heat-related illness?

[Dr. Matte] If someone has the warning signs that we mentioned, like the heavy sweating or light headedness, the first thing is to get them to a cool place, an air conditioned place is best. Remove any extra clothes they may be wearing and get them to drink plenty of water. If you see someone with signs of serious heat illness, like confusion, for example, you need to call 911 or get them to an emergency room right away for medical help. And while you're waiting for help, help them cool off, if you can.

[Dr. Gaynes] Tom, can you give us some ways to beat the heat?

[Dr. Matte] The most important way to beat the heat is really to prevent dangerous heat exposure, especially if you're a vulnerable person. So that means use your air conditioner, if you have one at home, or go to an air conditioned place, like a library, could be a friend's home, or a cooling center that some cities and towns open during heat waves. Try to avoid outdoor activity, especially during the hottest part of the day—in the afternoon, typically. And before the hot weather comes, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor about precautions that you might need to take because of your health or medications that you take. And then, for everyone, really, if they have family, friends, neighbors who they think may be vulnerable, they should check on them during hot weather to help them stay cool and also to recognize if they're developing heat illness and get help if they need it.

[Dr. Gaynes] Where can listeners get more information about heat-related illness?

[Dr. Matte] At the CDC website there's a lot of great information for people across the country. You can access it by going to cdc.gov and, in the search box, just type the word "heat."

[Dr. Gaynes] Thanks, Tom. I've been talking today with New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's Dr. Thomas Matte who discussed ways to avoid heat-related illness.

Remember, during heat waves, people should stay in air-conditioned environments as much as possible, drink plenty of water, and wear lightweight clothing. If you have a vulnerable family member, friend, or neighbor, check on them regularly.

Until next time, be well. This is Dr. Robert Gaynes for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO.