

Summer Woes

Dehydration and Heatstroke

"Dehydration and heatstroke go hand in hand," says Peter Galier, MD, associate professor of medicine at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. "It happens most commonly in people who are out in the sun."

What happens, explains Galier, is that people sweat and replace their lost electrolyte-packed body fluids with only water. Dehydration can soon follow, and heatstroke can set in if a person becomes so dehydrated they can't sweat enough to cool down, and their body temperature rises.

How to avoid it. "If you are outside and sweating, you should be drinking at least a 50-50 mix of Gatorade and water, which has potassium and sodium," Galier says. "You need to be drinking at least one small liter bottle of this mix every hour if you're working or exercising in the sun."

Poison Ivy

The old adage still rings true, explains Galier. "Leaves of three -- let them be," he says. So when the summer months begin, plan ahead when you know you're going to be trekking through the woods.

How to avoid it. "Poison ivy is a tri-leafed plant, usually with a little yellow and purple, and it tends to be anywhere with shrubbery, hiding out with other vegetation," says Galier. "So stay out of shrub areas or wear high boots or high socks, stay on the path, and don't touch anything you don't recognize."

Warning signs. Poison ivy can creep up on you, even if you wear head-to-toe clothing. "It's the oil of the leaf that's the problem," says Galier. "If you take your clothes off and you touch your clothes, you're going to get it." The "it" he's referring to is the itching and swelling.

What to do. It's time to get out the topical anti-itching cream again, like calamine lotion. "If you can suffer through it and it doesn't get worse, you can ride it out," says Galier. If it gets worse, you'll need to see a doctor for topical steroids or oral steroids."

Food-Borne Illnesses

"Food-borne illnesses are more common in summer for a number of reasons," says Linda Harris, PhD, professor in the food science and technology department at University of California Davis. "If the temperature is higher, there is more opportunity for temperature abuse of foods -- that is leaving them in the danger zone, which is anything above 40 and below 140 degrees. In this range, microorganisms that cause food-borne disease can multiply."

How to avoid it. "There are four basic rules for preventing food-borne illness: cook, clean, chill, and separate -- and these become important during summer," says Harris, who is a scientific communicator with the Institute of Food Technologists.

Warning signs. The warning signs of food-borne illness are the usual suspects, explains Harris: vomiting, stomach cramps, diarrhea, flu-like symptoms, or any combination of these not-so-pleasant symptoms.

What to do. Despite best efforts, if you fetch up with something you might suspect is food-borne, keep in mind, "Some food-borne illnesses, such as E. coli O157:H7, can be life-threatening, particularly for young children, the elderly, and those with weakened immune systems," according to the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. "Symptoms that are severe or prolonged may need to be treated. People who believe they may have contracted a food-borne illness should call their physician."

Mosquito Bites

While mosquito bites used to be little more than annoying and itchy bumps on your arm or behind your ear, now we have even more reason to avoid them with things like West Nile virus and Triple E (Eastern equine encephalitis) making headlines.

How to avoid it. Your attack against a mosquito bite is three-pronged, according to the CDC's web site: "Use insect repellent, particularly those with DEET, picaridin, or oil of lemon eucalyptus; wear as much clothing as the warm weather will allow; and avoid the outdoors during dusk and dawn -- peak biting times."

Warning signs. Mosquito bites will appear as red, raised bumps on your skin. Worse, they'll itch.

What to do. Mosquito bites usually go away in less than a week, according to the web site of the University of Maryland Medical Center. In the meantime, you can wash the area and keep it clean, use an ice pack or a cool compress to alleviate itching, take an antihistamine, or use an anti-itching cream, such as calamine lotion.

Sunburns

There's nothing worse than a sunburn in the summer. It hurts, it looks funny, and it means you have to stay inside until it gets better -- or go outside in the hot summer sun fully clothed to protect your burnt-to-a-crisp skin.

How to avoid it. It's simple -- either stay inside or wear sunscreen. According to the CDC's web site, "Dermatologists recommend using a full-spectrum sunscreen that blocks or absorbs all UV rays." And of course, don't think just because it's cloudy you can skip the sunscreen. Most UV rays pass right through clouds.

What to do. The bad news is, there's really no way to treat a sunburn -- you just need to ride it out. The CDC recommends aspirin, acetaminophen (Tylenol), or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) to relieve pain and headache and reduce fever; drinking water to help rehydrate; and cool baths.

If the sunburn is more severe and blisters develop, the CDC's web site recommends, "Lightly bandage or cover the area with gauze to prevent infection. The blisters should not be broken, as this will slow the healing process and increase the risk of infection."