



FIRST AID - HEATWAVE

Summer First Aid advice from the St John's Ambulance website.

August 2010 (*reviewed October 2012*)

Each year first aid alerts are issued by St John Ambulance when appropriate. Extreme heat can be dangerous for employees, members and visitors, but being prepared you can spot early warning signs of illness in such conditions.

Prevention is better than cure!

Headaches and dizziness are the first signs of the most serious problems of heat exhaustion and heatstroke, and people displaying these signs should remove themselves (or others) from the heat as soon as possible.

When the temperature is high, first aiders typically treat people for cramp, fainting, sunburn and dehydration. The advice is to avoid prolonged periods of sun, drink plenty of water and limit alcohol intake.

Heatstroke

Symptoms: rapid pulse, headache, dizziness – worsening to disorientation and confusion. Skin is hot to the touch, red and flushed.

Remedy: remove excess clothing (with permission), dial 999, move them to a cool place, wrap in a cold, wet sheet (or something similar) until their temperature falls. Once their temperature returns to normal keep them dry, noting their pulse and breathing until help arrives.

Useful tips

- ➊ **Heat exhaustion** - Is caused by the loss of salt and water from excessive sweating. Common symptoms include headache, dizziness, cramps, breathing that is fast but weak, and profuse sweating. Take the person into a cool, shady area and make them as comfortable as possible. Get them to lie down with legs raised and give them plenty of water. If you have them available, use isotonic drinks or a sachet of oral rehydration powder in water instead.
- ➋ **Dehydration** - Happens when the fluid lost from the body – usually through sweat – isn't replaced. Symptoms are a dry mouth and eyes, headaches, dark urine, dizziness and confusion. Avoid it by drinking water regularly, not just when you feel thirsty. The young and old are at particular risk, so it's crucial to rehydrate them promptly – and if you're

playing sports or other demanding activities, your fluid needs will be much higher. To treat dehydration, drink plenty of fluids; water is normally suitable but you may prefer to add oral rehydration powder to help replace the salts lost from the body.

- ☛ **Fainting** – This can be triggered by heat. If you're prone to fainting, ensure you eat regularly and don't stand up for extended periods during the heatwave. If someone faints, advise them to lie with their head down, then raise their legs on to your shoulders to improve blood flow to the brain. Make sure they have fresh air, and keep bystanders away if you can. Watch their face for signs of recovery, and as they begin to recover, help them to sit up gradually.
- ☛ **Sunburn** - Is one of the most common injuries presented to St John Ambulance volunteers. It's best to protect yourself by wearing sunscreen, protective clothing and staying in the shade, but if it's happened already there are some easy ways to ease the pain. As soon as you notice, cover yourself up and move out of the sun. Take frequent sips of cold water and cool the burnt skin with a cold damp cloth, or you may find it more practical to soak the area in a basin or bath of cool water for around ten minutes. Calamine or aftersun lotion can make you feel more comfortable. If your skin is blistered, you should seek medical advice – otherwise, carry on enjoying yourself out of the sun.
- ☛ **Cramp** - You're more likely to get cramp in the heat as it's often caused by sweating, dehydration or exercise. The sharp onset of pain makes it alarming, but by carefully stretching and gently massaging the affected muscles it can quickly be brought under control. If it's in the foot, stand with your weight in the front of the foot to stretch the muscles. If it's in the calf, straighten your knee and flex the foot upwards. If it's in the front of the thigh, raise the leg and bend the knee, and if it's in the back of the thigh you should straighten the knee. Massage the affected muscles afterwards.
- ☛ **Blister** - If you get a blister from shoes rubbing, don't burst it. If it's broken or likely to be damaged, cover with a dry, non-adhesive dressing that extends well beyond the edges of the blister. Do not cover a blister with any creams or lotions.

For further information see: www.sja.org.uk

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