

Helping seniors beat the heat

By **SHERRY A. MEARNS**

ALLPRO HOME HEALTH

The heat is on!

The month of May was the warmest on record worldwide, and the second warmest ever in Florida. And June is following suit, with record high temperatures recorded all over Southwest Florida in the weeks leading up to the official start of summer on June 21.

Each year, about 300 people in the United States die from heat-related ailments, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). In addition, thousands suffer from dehydration, heat stroke and heat exhaustion. Senior citizens are more susceptible to problems related to exposure to excessive heat and should take steps to avoid such exposure.

The faster you move, the faster your body heats up. And due to age-related physical changes, older adults can't cool down as well as younger adults, according to the American Geriatric Society Foundation for Health in Aging. Older people may not feel as hot when temperatures are dangerously high, and they are less likely to feel thirsty, even when they're almost dehydrated.

As a person ages, their sense of thirst decreases and by the time



Photos provided by AllPro Home Health

Punta Gorda resident Shirley Bauder, left, has her oscillating fan nearby as she receives water and tips on keeping cool this summer from AllPro Home Health nurse Sandy Edelheiser.

Signs & symptoms of heat exhaustion:

- Heavy sweating
- Paleness
- Muscle cramps
- Tiredness
- Weakness
- Dizziness
- Headache
- Nausea
- (or vomiting)
- Fainting
- Increased pulse
- Rapid breathing

an older person feels thirsty, he or she may already be dehydrated. Common symptoms of dehydration include confusion, poor skin

elasticity, cracked lips and dry mouth.

Everyone, especially seniors, should drink plenty of liquids to make up for the loss of

the most active and healthy seniors. Drinks with caffeine or alcohol should be avoided because they tend to dehydrate the body.

Drinking plain water, however, may not be enough as the body also loses sodium and potassium salts through sweating. Sports drinks can provide these minerals, but you should always check with your physician to ensure that an increase in fluids is

not medically contraindicated.

To protect your health when temperatures are extremely high, remember to keep cool and use common sense.

Plan ahead for venturing outdoors. Seniors should wear light-colored, loose-fitting clothing that allows the body to release heat. Head coverings, such as hats or caps, should be worn

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to shade the face and sun block should always be applied to exposed skin. And don't forget to wear your sunglasses.

When indoors, proper ventilation is essential to keep the temperature and humidity from becoming too high. If possible, an air conditioner should be used to keep

rooms cool. If air conditioning is not available, open windows on opposite ends of the house or building and use fans to cross-ventilate and increase airflow.

Heat stroke requires immediate medical attention to prevent permanent disability or death. Heat stroke, according to the CDC, occurs when the body

is unable to regulate its temperature. The body's temperature rises rapidly, the sweating mechanism fails, and the body is unable to cool down. Body temperature may rise to 106°F or higher within 10 to 15 minutes. Heat stroke can cause death or permanent disability if emergency treatment is not provided.

Symptoms of heat stroke are a high body temperature, red, hot and dry skin (no sweating), rapid pulse, throbbing headache, dizziness, nausea and vomiting.

Heat exhaustion, according to the CDC, is a milder form of heat-related illness and can usually be treated and stopped before it progresses to the more dangerous heat stroke. Heat exhaustion is the body's response to an excessive loss of the water and salt contained in sweat.

Signs and symptoms of heat exhaustion include heavy sweating, paleness, muscle cramps, tiredness,

weakness, dizziness, headache, nausea or vomiting, fainting, increased pulse and rapid breathing.

As you have seen, heat-related illness can be serious, especially for seniors. You can protect yourself by following these simple guidelines:

Drink plenty of fluids, but avoid alcohol and caffeinated drinks.

Find shade or air conditioning if possible.

If your home is not air-conditioned, make sure it has adequate ventilation.

Avoid strenuous work and exercise in the heat.

Limit outdoor activities to the morning hours if possible.

When going outdoors,

wear light-colored, loose-fitting clothing and a hat or other head covering.

Also when outdoors, apply a high SPF (30 or greater) sun block to exposed skin.

Keep in regular contact with friends, relatives and neighbors so they know you are safe.

Consult your doctor about your medications because some can inhibit sweat or aggravate heat-related conditions.

You can beat the heat this summer, if you know how to stay cool.

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