



NEWS RELEASE

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Health precautions urged during periods of prolonged heat

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Alabama Department of Public Health urges the public to protect themselves during periods of excessive heat by curtailing outdoor physical activity as much as possible and by taking other precautionary measures. The danger of possible heat illness is increased in high humidity areas, such as Alabama.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that between 1979 and 1999 excessive heat exposure caused 8,015 deaths in the United States. More people in this country died from extreme heat than from hurricanes, lightning, tornadoes, floods and earthquakes combined during this period of time.

According to the health department's Center for Health Statistics, three Alabamians died from excessive heat in 2003, the latest year for which totals are available. The recent year in which the most excessive heat-related deaths occurred in the state was in 1980 when a record 125 deaths were attributed to that cause.

The total numbers of deaths in the state due to excessive heat by year are as follows: 1994, 2; 1995, 19; 1996, 2; 1997, 7; 1998, 7; 1999, 11; 2000, 8, 2001, 5; and 2002, 6.

The following suggestions can help protect against heat-related illness. Friends and relatives of elderly persons who live alone are advised to check frequently on them. Those without air-conditioning who live on upper floors are especially susceptible to heat buildup. Never leave anyone in a closed, parked vehicle.

If air-conditioning is not available at home, persons should spend the hotter part of the day in air-conditioned areas, such as malls or stores. When at home, they should use wet sheets with electric fans to help circulate cool air instead of hot air. When temperatures are in the high 90s, fans will not prevent heat-related illness. Moving to an air-conditioned place is the recommended way to cool off.

For individuals whose jobs involve heavy labor, work should be carefully alternated with frequent cooling-off periods in shaded areas. Salt tablets should not be taken except upon the advice of a physician.

During extended periods in which extreme heat blankets the state, all individuals should take general precautions, such as increasing water intake, staying out of direct sunlight and avoiding strenuous physical activity. Wear lightweight, light-colored, loose-fitting clothing. Adequate

amounts of water and access to cool shelter should be available to children, the elderly and the chronically ill, as well as to pets.

People on certain medications or with health problems such as heart disease and diabetes may be at greater risk for heat-related illnesses during periods of prolonged extreme heat.

Do not drink liquids that contain caffeine, alcohol, or large amounts of sugar. These beverages actually cause you to lose more body fluid. Also, avoid very cold drinks, because they can cause stomach cramps.

Everyone should be alert for symptoms of heat-related illnesses, including dizziness, weakness, rapid heartbeat, throbbing headache, loss of ability to sweat, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, cramps and confusion. If any of these symptoms occurs, the individual should get out of the heat immediately and call for medical help without delay.

The public is encouraged to keep up their guard to protect against heat-related illnesses. Remember: Heat is a killer, and the best defense against it is prevention.

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