

Summer Exercise: How to Keep Cool in Hot Weather

In the excitement of a pickup basketball game or the relaxation of a friendly round of golf, you might not notice the temperature rising - but your body will. If you exercise outdoors in the heat, use caution and common sense to prevent heat-related illnesses. Outdoor exercise can be challenging when the temperature soars. Stay safe by drinking enough fluids, wearing proper clothing and timing your workout to avoid extreme heat.

How hot weather affects your body

Exercising in hot weather puts extra stress on your heart and lungs. Both the exercise itself and the air temperature increase your body temperature. To dissipate heat, more blood circulates through your skin. This leaves less blood for your muscles, which increases your heart rate. If the humidity is high, your body faces added stress because sweat doesn't readily evaporate from your skin - which only pushes your body temperature higher.

Under normal conditions, your skin, blood vessels and perspiration level adjust to the heat. But these natural cooling systems may fail if you're exposed to high temperatures and humidity for too long. The result may be a heat-related illness, such as heat cramps, heat exhaustion or heatstroke.

How to avoid heat-related illnesses

To keep it cool, keep these basic precautions in mind:

- **Take it slow.** If you're used to exercising indoors or in cooler weather, take it easy at first. As your body adapts to the heat, gradually increase the length and intensity of your workouts. If you have a chronic medical condition or take medication, ask your doctor if you need to take additional precautions.
- **Drink plenty of fluids.** Your body's ability to sweat and cool down depends on adequate rehydration. Drink plenty of water while you're working out - even if you don't feel thirsty. If you're planning to exercise intensely or for longer than one hour, consider sports drinks instead. These drinks can replace the sodium, chloride and potassium you lose through sweating. Avoid drinks that contain caffeine or alcohol, which actually promote fluid loss.
- **Dress appropriately.** Lightweight, loosefitting clothing promotes sweat evaporation and cooling by letting more air pass over your body. Avoid dark colors, which can absorb the heat. A light-colored hat can limit your exposure to the sun.
- **Avoid midday sun.** Exercise in the morning or evening - when it's likely to be cooler outdoors - rather than the middle of the day. If possible, exercise in the shade or in a pool.
- **Wear sunscreen.** A sunburn decreases your body's ability to cool itself.
- **Have a backup plan.** If you're concerned about the heat or humidity, stay indoors. Work out at the gym, walk laps inside the mall or climb stairs inside an air-conditioned building.

Know when to call it quits

When you're exercising in the heat, be on the lookout for heat-related illness. Signs and symptoms may include:

- **Weakness**
- **Headache**
- **Dizziness**
- **Muscle cramps**
- **Nausea or vomiting**
- **Rapid heartbeat**

If you suspect a heat-related illness, stop exercising and get out of the heat. Drink water, and wet and fan your skin. If you don't feel better within 30 minutes, contact your doctor. If you develop a fever higher than 102 F (38.9 C) or become faint or confused, seek immediate medical help. Regular exercise is important - but don't let your hot weather workouts put your health at risk.

