

NEWS RELEASE

Children at High Risk for Heat-Related Ailments during Outdoor Play, Exercise

HOUSTON (May 11, 2007) - A rise in childhood obesity has many experts advocating exercise and outdoor play and activities for youngsters. But as summer approaches, be mindful that children's small bodies are highly susceptible to dehydration and heat-related illnesses, particularly given Houston's sweltering heat and humidity.

"Heat can cause health problems for people of all ages, but it's harder for young children to recognize when their body is in trouble," said Dr. Mary Rocha with Ben Taub General Hospital's El Jardin and special needs pediatric clinics. "That's why it's important for adults to be vigilant and watch for signs of dehydration or exhaustion, particularly if kids are going to be outside for a while."

Most heat-related ailments are caused by heat and dehydration. Dehydration occurs when the body loses excessive amounts of fluid, usually through sweating. In children, early signs of dehydration are subtle, like a dry mouth and decreased urination. However, later signs – such as an inability to produce tears, sunken eyes, and skin that remains compressed when pinched – are medical emergencies.

If ignored, dehydration can lead to heat cramps, which also result from excessive sweating and strenuous activity in the heat. Cramps mostly occur in the hamstring and calf muscles and, although painful, usually go away after drinking water and moving to a cool environment. While cramps can be wrongfully attributed to rough play, they can be a sign of heat exhaustion.

"Children, like adults, are susceptible to heat exhaustion if they spend too much time in the heat, and the risk is higher if they are physically active," said Rocha.

Warning signs of heat exhaustion include excessive sweating, paleness, weakness, dizziness, headaches, and nausea or vomiting. In most cases, resting, drinking water, and moving to an air-conditioned environment will remedy the situation. However, if signs worsen or persist for longer than an hour, medical attention may be necessary. If left untreated, heat exhaustion can progress to heat stroke, which is a medical emergency.

"Exercise and outdoor play is great for children and their health, but encourage them to drink water frequently," said Rocha. "Keep a close eye on them and check on them regularly when they're outside. If your child is attending camp or daycare, ask questions. Find out about outdoor activities and make sure they take heat safety precautions."

In addition to drinking plenty of water, other tips to prevent heat-related injuries include wearing lightweight clothes, taking frequent rest breaks, and avoiding outdoor activities during the hottest part of the day. Above all, learn to recognize warning signs. If you think your child may be sick, consult a physician immediately.

The Harris County Hospital District is the public health care system for the nation's third most-populous county. It provides more than 1.1 million health care visits each year to uninsured and underinsured residents of Harris County. The hospital district operates Ben Taub General Hospital, Lyndon B. Johnson General Hospital, Quentin Mease Community Hospital, and an extensive network of community-based clinics, health centers, and mobile health units.