

Dehydration and youth sports: Curb the risk

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Anytime children or adolescents play sports or exercise in hot weather, they're at risk of heat-related illnesses. You don't need to worry from the sidelines, though. Understand how heat-related problems happen and what steps you can take to prevent them.

Risk factors for dehydration

Your child might be particularly vulnerable to dehydration and other heat-related illnesses in a hot or humid environment if he or she:

- Wears clothing or protective gear that contributes to excessive heat retention
- Rarely exercises
- Is overweight or obese
- Is sick or had a recent illness, especially involving diarrhea, vomiting or a fever
- Is taking certain supplements or medications, such as cold medicine
- Has had a previous heat-related illness
- Has a chronic condition, such as diabetes
- Isn't well rested

Acclimating to the heat

Heat-related problems are most likely within the first few days of practice in a hot environment. That's why it's best to take it easy at first, gradually increasing the amount of activity — and the amount of protective equipment — as the days pass. Young athletes might need up to two weeks to safely acclimate to the heat.

During hot and humid conditions, coaches are encouraged to:

- Require young athletes to drink plenty of fluids before practice and during regular beverage breaks — even if they aren't thirsty
- Make sure clothing is light-colored, lightweight and loose fitting, or exposes as much of the skin as possible

- Decrease or stop practices or competitions if necessary, or move them indoors or to a shady area

Know when to slow down — or call it quits

To determine when heat and humidity make strenuous exercise risky for young athletes, your child's coach might monitor the wet bulb globe temperature (WBGT) — the standard index of temperature and humidity combined. If the WBGT is too high, outdoor athletic activities might need to be limited or canceled.

Spotting dehydration and other heat-related problems

Even mild dehydration can affect your child's athletic performance and make him or her lethargic and irritable. Left untreated, dehydration increases the risk of other heat-related illnesses, including heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heatstroke.

Encourage your child to pay attention to early signs and symptoms of dehydration, including:

- Dry or sticky mouth
- Thirst
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Cramps
- Excessive fatigue

Remind your child that he or she is responsible for reporting these signs and symptoms to the coach right away. Don't let embarrassment keep your child on the field. If dehydration is detected early, fluids and rest might be all that's needed. If your child seems confused or loses consciousness, seek emergency care.

Prevention is key

If your child plays sports in hot weather, encourage him or her to drink plenty of fluids before, during and after practices and games. Teach your child the signs and symptoms of dehydration, as well as the importance of speaking up if they occur. Involve your child's coach, too. Talk to the coach about adjusting the intensity of practice depending on the temperature and humidity on the field — and support the coach's decision to cancel games and practices when it's dangerously hot outside.