

Heat-Related Illness and Young Athletes: 3 Important Things Parents and Coaches Need to Know

Learn what you can do to help prevent heat-related illness during hot-weather or high-humidity training and play.

Heat-related illnesses — heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke — are a real concern for all athletes, but parents need to be extra conscious of young athletes who may not know when they need to take a break.

No matter what sport is being played, during practices and games when medical professionals are not present, it's extremely important for everybody — especially parents on the sidelines watching their children participate — to have some information regarding heat-related illness.

Here are some tips to help parents and coaches prevent heat stroke, heat exhaustion or cramps in their child or player.

Heat Acclimatization

Slowly getting used to the heat is the biggest prevention method. The goal is to increase heat tolerance, because that is the biggest problem that athletes face. They get out there too quickly, do too much and are not acclimated to the weather, and subsequently develop problems, like heat exhaustion or heat stroke. During the first 10 to 14 days of heat exposure, athletes should gradually increase the duration and intensity of their exercise or activity. This is especially important for children and teens who may be out of shape and/or considered overweight. It's also important to understand that a heat-related illness isn't confined to hot days. Individuals are also susceptible on days with moderate temperatures and high humidity.

Drink Plenty of Water

Staying hydrated is one of the easiest ways to help prevent heat-related illness. Coaches and parents need to make sure unlimited amounts of water are available for athletes during practices and games, but it is also important for them to stress that athletes need to drink water before, during and after activity so they stay hydrated enough to maintain an adequate body temperature.

Early Recognition and Cooling

Quick recognition of a heat-related illness is paramount to survival because the signs and symptoms are generally nonspecific:

- Disorientation, dizziness, weakness, unusual behavior

- Headache, vomiting

Be proactive. If you see someone struggling, pull them out of the game or practice, ask them how they are feeling, give them some water and cool them down. Cold compresses or ice should always be kept on hand for circumstances that require immediate cooling.

If your child or a specific athlete is not behaving typically and the conditions are right for heat-related illness, you should investigate. Parents, coaches and trainers know their kids the best and can recognize when something just doesn't seem right.