

6 Tips for Athletes to Prevent Heat Injury

Heat illness in athletes is a real concern, especially when it comes to youth whose sweat glands aren't as developed as adults. No matter what age, there are serious concerns about exercising outdoors in the summer heat. [Marc Molis, MD](#), UnityPoint Health, offers six pieces of advice to stay out of the emergency room.

6 Tips for Heat Injury Prevention

1. **Pre-hydrate.** Begin hydrating several hours before practicing or performing any sports outdoors and continue to hydrate during the activity. Always hydrate ahead of time with water, not [sugary sports drinks](#). It is best to only consume sports drinks during prolonged and strenuous exercise that lasts longer than an hour.
2. **Wear sunscreen.** The most common heat-related injury in those playing or practicing sports is sunburn. Generously apply sunscreen 30 minutes before going outdoors, use a SPF of 30 or higher and use a product with a label of "water resistant" to allow for sweaty skin.
3. **Consider the clock.** If two-a-day practices are allowed, organizers should avoid the hottest time of the day, the afternoon. Any time outdoors in the summer heat should be in the morning or in the late afternoon or evenings. When it comes to endurance athletes, Dr. Molis says there is a formula that is used to determine the risk for heat illness in athletes, called the [Wet Bulb Globe Temperature \(WBGT\)](#). According to the National Weather Service, it takes into account temperature, humidity, wind speed, sun angle and cloud cover. Dr. Molis says this tool is often used for marathon or triathlons.
4. **Get acclimated.** Dr. Molis recommends less than one hour of intense exercise in extreme heat if a person isn't acclimated or used to performing in the hot temperatures. He says anyone who plans to exercise outdoors should get used to working out in the heat by starting gradually and building up the amount of time under the sun.
5. **Wear light-colored clothing.** Wear light-colored, light-weight clothing that offers sun protection.
6. **Manage medications.** Dr. Molis says some drugs can impair heat loss, like anti-histamines. He suggests using nasal steroids instead. He also suggests avoiding Sudafed and ephedra as well.

Heat Illness in Sports

"Triathlons and marathons often showcase more heat illness in athletes. Other outdoors sports with a long playing time and intensive physical activity, like soccer or outdoor basketball, also often results in heat-related illness," Dr. Molis says.

If you are looking for signs of [heat exhaustion](#) in kids or adult athletes, Dr. Molis says to look for these symptoms:

- Headache
- Dizziness
- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Heat cramps
- Nausea/vomiting

“This can progress into [heat stroke](#) in athletes, if not treated and can include altered mental status, seizures or neurologic signs and symptoms,” Dr. Molis says.

How to Handle Heat Illness in Athletes

If you notice heat illness in athletes, Dr. Molis gives five steps to prevent a more serious diagnosis.

- Immediately stop activity
- Get to a shaded, cool environment
- Replace fluids
- Spray athlete with a cool mist or fanning
- Stretch cramping muscles

Dr. Molis says if an athlete is vomiting, having seizures or starting to go unconscious, it's time to call 911.