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Summer Is Here! Keep Working Out, But Stay Safe in Hot Weather

By [Denise Reynolds RD G+](#) June 23, 2013

Outdoor workouts like walking, running, biking or swimming have been shown to lower the risk of poor mental health while boosting good physical health. A Scottish study found that outdoor fitness training helped patients lower the incidence of such conditions as mild depression, insomnia, stress, and lack of coping. A separate study, conducted in the US found that hiking in nature can [improve creativity and cognitive function](#).



Unfortunately, federal health officials have warned that [this summer may be hotter than last](#) which could increase risks of heat-related illnesses, such as heatstroke. Exercise physiologist Franci Cohen says, “The excitement and happiness that comes along with beautiful weather can often drive us to push hard real fast. In an uncontrolled environment with high heat and humidity, this can be a deadly combination.”

Exercising in hot weather puts extra stress on your body. Under normal conditions, your skin, blood vessels and perspiration adjust to the heat. But these natural cooling systems may fail if you are exposed to high temperatures and humidity for too long or if you do not drink enough fluids. The result could be a heat-related illness

- **Heat cramps.** Heat cramps are painful muscle contractions, mainly affecting the calves, quadriceps and abdominals. Affected muscles may feel firm to the touch. Your body temperature may be normal.
- **Heat exhaustion.** With heat exhaustion, your body temperature rises as high as 104 F (40 C) and you may experience nausea, vomiting, headache, fainting, weakness and cold, clammy skin. If left untreated, this can lead to heatstroke.
- **Heatstroke.** Heatstroke is a life-threatening emergency condition that occurs when your body temperature is greater than 104 F (40 C). Your skin may be hot, but your body may stop sweating to help cool itself. You may develop confusion and irritability. You need immediate medical attention to prevent brain damage, organ failure or even death.

Health experts offer the following tips for taking your workout outdoors:

Acclimate to the Hotter Weather

If you have been used to working out in the gym throughout the colder months of winter

and early spring, take some time to adjust to exercising in the hotter conditions. The average person can take one to two weeks to acclimate to the warmer, more humid outdoor summer weather. Begin with lighter workouts in the early morning or late evening and gradually increase from there.

Dress Accordingly

Wear light-colored, lightweight clothing made from moisture-wicking fabric (such as Nike's Dri-FIT). This keeps moisture away from the skin and dries quickly. Cotton t-shirts and shorts should be avoided because they have a tendency to get sweaty and stay wet. This can make you feel hotter.

Wear Sunscreen

Apply sunscreen 30 minutes before you go outside to exercise. This not only reduces your risk of sunburn, but can also help your body's ability to cool itself. Choose a sunscreen that is water-resistant, particularly if you tend to sweat more heavily. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also recommends limiting sun exposure between 10 am and 2 pm, when the sun's rays are the strongest.

Drink Plenty of Fluids

Dehydration is a risk factor for heat-related illness. Even if you don't feel thirsty, drink plenty of water or sports drink during a workout to stay hydrated. Experts recommend six to eight ounces every 15 to 20 minutes. Remember also to drink before and after as well!

Other Important Tips

- If you are taking medications or supplements, it is important to review these with your doctor or pharmacist. This is particularly important if you take a diuretic as it could place you at a higher risk for dehydration.
- Avoid Air Pollution – especially important if you have a [chronic condition](#) such as asthma, diabetes, heart conditions or lung disease. Mayo Clinic physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist says, “with the combination of air pollution and exercise, the potential health problems are increased” because you breathe more deeply and inhale more air than when you are sedentary.
- Check the forecast before you leave. If you are concerned about the day's heat or humidity, stay indoors to work out.
- Pay attention to these warning signs of heat-related illness: Muscle cramps, nausea or vomiting, weakness, headache, dizziness, or confusion. If you develop any, you must lower your body temperature and get hydrated. Stop exercising immediately and get out of the heat. If you don't feel better within 30 minutes, contact your doctor.