



MedStar Health

## Heat safety for sports

Liz Hollenczer, MS, LAT, ATC, CES and Kari Kindschi, MD

The summer is one of the busiest times of the year for sports, especially lacrosse. However, summer is also the hottest time of the year with temperatures, humidity, and UV intensity all reaching their peaks. The combination of high heat and athletic activity can be dangerous if not prepared for appropriately. Some simple things you can do to stay safe in the heat include:

- Stay hydrated with water and electrolytes: Drinking plenty of water, in addition to sports drinks like Gatorade, keep a healthy balance of water and salt in the body.
- Practice sun safety to avoid sunburns: Sunburns can make it more likely for a person to experience a heat illness while doing activity.
- Avoid practicing or playing games in the middle of the day: The hottest time of the day is from 10am to 4pm. By scheduling activity in the morning or evening, unnecessary exposure to heat can be prevented.
- Let your body acclimatize to the weather: Pacing yourself over days as you get used to the heat can help prepare your body to safely handle the heat of the summer.

Since we can't completely prevent the effects of heat, it is important to recognize the signs of heat illness during activity. The most common include:

- Muscle cramping
- Nausea or vomiting
- Disorientation or confusion
- Weakness or dizziness
- Stopping sweating
- Change in overall demeanor

If you notice someone experiencing these symptoms, it is important to help them cool off as quickly as possible and get them into the care of a medical provider, such as an athletic trainer who may be on site. While there are different types of heat illness, all should be taken seriously. Heat cramps and heat exhaustion are generally less severe while heat stroke is a medical emergency that requires immediate care by a healthcare professional.

By cooling someone off quickly, they can return their core body temperature to a normal level, preventing organ damage and long-term health issues. Some ways to cool an athlete quickly include:

- Cold tub immersion
- Sitting in a cold shower
- Ice bags around the back of the neck, armpits, groin
- Moving to a shaded tent or into an air-conditioned building or car

Heat illnesses are serious events and seeking out medical care should not be delayed. Through prevention and rapid cooling, athletes can be spared serious long-term health issues that can arise from heat exposure.

For more information about the signs and symptoms of different types of heat illness you can refer to the CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/extreme-heat/signs-symptoms/index.html>

For more information about acclimatization guidelines, you can refer to the Korey Stringer Institute: <https://koreystringer.institute.uconn.edu/heat-acclimatization/>