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Beating the heat while working out

■ BY MATT BRZYCKI

As the temperature and humidity increase through the summer months, so does the risk of thermal disorders (or heat-related injuries).

THERMAL DISORDERS

The importance of safeguarding your body against thermal disorders cannot be overemphasized. Individuals who are overweight, out of shape and/or unaccustomed to laboring in the heat are most susceptible.

There are three types of thermal disorders: heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Let's take a closer look at each of the three conditions.

Heat Cramps

This thermal disorder is characterized by painful, involuntary muscle spasms that usually affect the legs and abdomen. Heat cramps are the least dangerous of the three types of thermal disorders.

Heat Exhaustion

The characteristics of heat exhaustion

include skin that's cool, moist and pale; a weak pulse; chills; headache; nausea; dizziness; disorientation; exhaustion; and weakness. Heat exhaustion is considered to be a medical emergency.



Matt Brzycki

Heat Stroke

This thermal disorder is characterized by high body temperature; skin that's red and hot; a rapid or weak pulse; rapid or shallow breathing; confusion; and cessation of sweating. Heat stroke is the most severe type of thermal disorder; it can be life-threatening.

THE MECHANICS OF SWEATING

Under resting conditions, your core temperature is about 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit (or 37 degrees Celsius) and there's a balance between heat production and heat loss. When exercising, your core temperature increases and triggers several heat-loss mechanisms. In the case of exercise, the primary mechanism for heat loss is the evaporation of sweat. Your blood carries internal body heat to the surface of your skin where sweat is secreted from an estimated 2.5 million sweat

glands and evaporation occurs. As the sweat evaporates, it cools your skin; this, in turn, cools your blood. The cooled blood then returns to the warmer core and the cycle is repeated. This physiological process cools your internal body. (To illustrate the effects of evaporation, wet your finger and blow on it. You'll quickly note a cooling sensation as the evaporative process withdraws heat from your skin.)

Point to ponder: Sweating, in itself, doesn't cool the body; evaporation does.

It's hard to believe but people are constantly sweating. In cool, dry weather a relatively small amount of sweat is produced and the rate of evaporation can keep pace with the rate of perspiration. In this case, your skin is dry to the touch and you're not aware that you're sweating—even though this alone may involve about a quart of water per day.

Unfortunately, this cooling mechanism doesn't work well when the heat and/or humidity is high. When the humidity is high, there's a large amount of moisture already in the air. At higher levels of humidity, the evaporation of your sweat is hindered because the

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air is highly saturated with water vapor and, as a result, there's little or no place for any extra moisture to go. This situation causes the body to overheat and may result in a thermal disorder. In fact, a temperature of only 80 degrees Fahrenheit approaches a dangerous level if the humidity reaches 90 percent.

EXERCISING IN HEAT AND HUMIDITY

You should gradually acclimatize to high heat and humidity. Initially, this may necessitate training outdoors during the cooler parts of the day such as the early morning and late evening. Most adverse reactions to heat and humidity occur during the first few days of training outdoors. As you adapt to hot, humid conditions—which usually takes about 7-14 days—you'll be able to train with greater levels of intensity while maintaining a safe body temperature. Another option is to move your physical training indoors to air-conditioned surroundings (assuming, of course, that you have access to such an environment).

To promote heat loss, you should wear loose clothing that's lightweight and light-colored. (Lighter colors reflect the sun's rays; darker colors absorb them.) Under no circumstances should you train in rubberized clothing or a "sauna suit." Training with your body covered in this manner can be lethal

since these garments trap perspiration and cause you to overheat rapidly. Remember, evaporation of sweat is necessary to cool the body.

It's important for you to rehydrate with cold fluids as needed. You should measure your bodyweight each day before and after training. In this way, you can monitor your water loss to determine if adequate rehydration is taking place. You should consume about 16 ounces of water for every pound of bodyweight that you lose while training. Warning: If you deny yourself fluids under adverse conditions, you're putting yourself at risk for a thermal disorder. And don't wait until you're thirsty to drink. Thirst isn't a good indicator of fluid needs.

WHAT ABOUT SPORTS DRINKS?

When it comes to exercising in the heat, is a sports drink better than plain, old water? Well, water can be an effective fluid but consuming a sports drink may be more beneficial.

For one thing, sports drinks contain electrolytes which are lost through sweating. This may reduce the risk of an electrolyte imbalance. In addition, sports drinks contain carbohydrates which provide you with a source of energy during intense activity and expedite the recovery process. (Water has no calories

and, therefore, isn't a source of energy.) Finally, sports drinks have flavoring which makes them more palatable and encourages their consumption.

THE BOTTOM LINE

With increased temperature and humidity comes an increased risk of thermal disorder. However, this risk can be reduced a great deal through adequate precaution and preparation.

One of the best ways that you can prepare yourself for the heat and humidity is to be in good condition. One study involved male Marine recruits who went through basic training from 1988-1992 at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in Parris Island, South Carolina. The researchers found that recruits who were overweight and had slower times in a 1.5-mile run had a higher risk of thermal disorders. Specifically, 18% of the recruits met the criteria for "high risk" but these recruits had 47% of the thermal disorders that occurred during basic training.

Matt Brzycki is the coordinator of Recreational Fitness and Wellness at Princeton University. His books are available at www.operationaltactics.org.

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