

Seniors need extra care to beat the heat

Written by Lavdena Orr, M.D., Courtesy of AmeriHealth Caritas, Special to the NNPA from The Washington Informer

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Summer is fast approaching. The days will be long. Your grandchildren will be out of school. You will want to spend time outdoors enjoying barbecues and other activities that are part of this season.

You should have a wonderful time. But you also need to be careful. Daytime summer high temperatures are often above 90 degrees here in July and August. The humidity can make it feel even hotter.

People over age 65 are at higher risk of suffering a heat-related illness, such as heat exhaustion or even heat stroke. They may be slower to adjust to higher temperatures. Some may have medical conditions or take medication that affects their ability to cope with heat. While seniors can and should get outside, they need to take steps to stay as comfortable, and as safe, as possible.

Use air conditioning to stay cool

If you have air conditioning in your home and — if you have one — your car, use it. In addition to keeping you cool, the dry, air conditioned air will feel much more pleasant than the humid air outside. If the evening weather happens to be cooler and dry, you can turn it off for a few hours during the evening. But keep it on during the day.

If you do not have air conditioning, you can use electric fans. But you should spend as much time as possible during the day in an air conditioned environment, such as a library or an indoor shopping mall.

Go early or late

The heat and sun are strongest in the late morning and afternoon. If possible, you should save outdoor activities for the early morning (before 9 a.m.) or very late afternoon (after 5 p.m.).

Dress for the weather

This is not the weather for cardigan sweaters or wool suits. If you plan to be outside longer than

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for just a short walk, like going from your front door to your car, you should wear light, loose-fitting clothing. Lighter colors are best, as they reflect more of the sunlight and heat than darker colors.

You should also wear a hat and put on sunscreen to protect your head and skin from sunburn.

Drink water

While not really a heat-related illness, dehydration occurs much more quickly in hot weather because you're sweating. Even if you don't feel thirsty, make sure you drink plenty of water. You may want to take a water bottle if you are going to be outside for any length of time.

Cool down when you come home

Even if you follow the tips above, you should cool down when you return home. A shower, bath or even a sponge bath can help. If it is the middle of the day and you have the time, taking a nap is also a good idea.

If you start to feel weak or dizzy from the heat, you should go into an air conditioned building as soon as possible. If those feelings don't go away, you should call your doctor.

Even during the summer, it is still important to get outside and do physical activities. With a few simple steps, your summer can be a pleasant one.

Dr. Lavdena Orr is medical director of AmeriHealth Caritas VIP Plans in the District of Columbia. AmeriHealth Caritas VIP Plans offers two products in the District — AmeriHealth VIP Select, a Medicare Advantage product with prescription drug coverage open to all of the District's Medicare beneficiaries, and AmeriHealth VIP Care, a special needs plan for Washingtonians who are eligible for both Medicaid and Medicare (dual-eligibles). For more information, visit www.amerihealthvipdc.com