

An unforeseen risk from heatstroke

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Correspondent

One of my hiking friends recently contacted me to share an unusual, and unforeseen, injury that occurred during a hike. Most of us are aware of, and recognize, the danger presented by heatstroke; but very few people seem to be aware of another very serious danger that lurks in the hot sun. I certainly wasn't; and, as it turns out, first responders who arrived on scene weren't aware either.

As if the dangers directly presented by heatstroke were not enough, a Sisters-area resident learned, firsthand, that heatstroke comes with other hazards, as well. In this case, the incident resulted in hospital care and subsequent recovery that far exceeded what might have normally been expected under the circumstances.

Heatstroke is a type of hyperthermia that typically poses a possible danger during extremely hot weather and can be exacerbated by physical exertion, age, humidity, medications, and other factors. It occurs when a person's body temperature reaches an unsafe level, generally considered to be at or above 104 degrees, and the body is unable to eliminate the unusual heat gain.

Symptoms may include headache and dizziness. If unrecognized and untreated, a loss of consciousness may result. When that happened in this case, even more serious injuries resulted.

Although the incident in question occurred in Arizona, it can happen anywhere, or anytime, when body temperature reaches an unmanageable level; and the Sisters area has certainly had its share of hot weather this summer. In this instance, the victim did lose consciousness

and took a hard fall to the ground. As it turned out, however, that was only the beginning and was not the worst of it.

Several people were on hand to render assistance, and sheriff's deputies arrived on scene fairly quickly to render assistance. What no one realized, however — including the first responders — was how hot the ground was. When a person suddenly loses consciousness and hits the ground, a common tendency is to avoid moving the victim until a full assessment of the incident can be made.

In this case, however, that turned out to be a big mistake; and the people involved want others to know about it to help prevent it from happening to anyone else. What everyone failed to consider was the danger posed by the superheated ground. Not only did the ground heat aggravate the person's overheated condition, but the ground was so hot that it began to burn into the victim's body.

After the victim's condition was stabilized in the hospital, the medical staff counted 32 separate burns on the victim's body, many of them third-degree. As a result, the recovery period was extended from hours or days to months. Multiple

skin grafts were necessary, and hospital bills soared to hundreds of thousands of dollars — all because no one was aware of the danger presented by the extremely hot ground surface that the victim had fallen onto.

The people involved in this incident are hopeful that warning others of this hazard will spare other potential victims and prevent a similar occurrence. If the person had been moved to a shady area or, even if clothing or other objects had been placed under the victim, some of the serious effects of this incident could have been prevented.

Of course, prevention of heatstroke in the first place is a good starting point; and recognition of the symptoms is a key factor. Avoiding extremely hot conditions is the first — and, perhaps best — preventive measure. Drinking plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration and taking opportunities to rest and cool off are extremely important when overheating could pose a threat. Thirst, itself, is not necessarily a reliable indicator; and fluids containing alcohol and caffeine should be avoided, as they can contribute to dehydration.

Lightweight, light-colored, and loose-fitting clothing can also go a long way

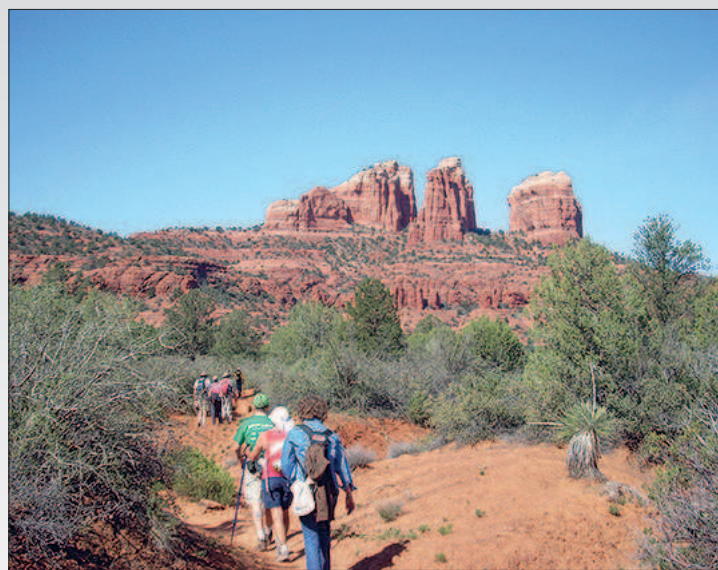


PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Hikers and others engaged in outdoor activities during hot weather need to be wary of heatstroke and another lesser known dangers posed by the hot sun.

toward helping keep the body from overheating. Broad-brimmed (and light-colored) hats are also recommended. Headaches, dizziness, weakness, and mental confusion are indicators that something is not right. When symptoms are observed, measures should be immediately taken to cool off the victim.

Even without the unexpected danger of burns, heatstroke can lead to death; so one cannot be too careful. Being knowledgeable about heatstroke symptoms and safety precautions is the first step; and keeping alert for them can go a long way toward preventing a repeat of incidents such as this.

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