

The difference between heat stroke and heat exhaustion

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For the Wallowa County
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Wallowa County Chieftain, File

The temperature in Wallowa County has been above average this summer, and the Northwest saw a heat wave in late June 2021 that brought record heat to the region.

ENTERPRISE — Elvis Presley may have felt his temperature rising if he'd been living in Wallowa County a few weeks ago during our unprecedented heat wave.

This summer has seen hot temperatures like no other. The mercury soared into the triple digits on several consecutive days in heat wave after heat wave. Heat advisories and red-flag warnings have become part of our everyday vocabulary. Wildfires in Oregon have made the national news. This time of year heat-related illnesses such as heat stroke and heat exhaustion are on everyone's minds, from medical personnel to veterinarians, from parents to pet owners. Whether you have two legs or four legs, you and your pet are susceptible to the heat and its effects. But what exactly is a heat-related illness? Here is what to look for in heat-related illnesses, how to treat and how to prevent them.

Different illnesses

First, heat stroke and heat exhaustion are different. But both are serious medical conditions. Heat stroke is a life-threatening illness and requires immediate medical attention. It happens when the body gets too hot and is characterized by confusion, dizziness, rapid pulse, throbbing headache, extreme thirst, nausea and vomiting, having deceptively cool skin, and a high body

temperature. It most often occurs when people exercise too much or are overly active during hot weather without drinking enough fluids.

According to Theresa Russell, family nurse practitioner at Wallowa Memorial Medical Clinic, the key factor for heat stroke is a body temperature of 104 degrees Fahrenheit or higher. At that temperature, "the body's organs are not getting cooled," she said. She said other symptoms include low blood pressure, flushing, low urine output and the lungs may have a crackling sound. In addition, a person may be "groggy and can't think," she said.

With heat exhaustion, she said, "the temperature is not as high," but the person's heart may be beating faster, and they might be breathing faster to oxygenate their blood faster. Also, the person might feel faint, weak, dizzy, tired or nauseated, have poor coordina-

tion, be thirsty and be sweating heavily.

Russell said the clinic "treated a couple of cases, due to not enough water intake, when it got over 100. It (the cases) came so early this year."

There are people more prone to heat-related illnesses than others. People who are 70 years old and older "are more sensitive," to the heat, Russell said. Also, people with underlying chronic conditions such as diabetes or cancer. She also mentioned people who are "deconditioned to doing much," and who try to do too much in the heat, people with large muscle mass or who are obese, or people with sweat gland dysfunctions who don't perspire enough may experience a heat-related illness more so than others. Going from one extreme to another — cool to hot — can set up a heat-related illness, as well.

Something many people may not consider as a contributing factor for a heat-related illness is medications. Russell cautioned people to read the information included with their medications. Some caution against sun exposure. "Read the warning labels," on medications she said, especially those on diuretics and beta blockers.

Preventing either condition

Prevention includes taking frequent breaks when working outdoors, planning outdoor activity prior to the hottest part of the day (usually between 10 a.m. and 2 or 3 p.m.).

"Pay attention to the weather," Russell said.

Staying hydrated and wearing loose, cotton clothing including a hat and pacing your activity are also tips for avoiding heat related incidents. Hydration should include water. Alcohol or caffeinated drinks, both of which are dehydrating, should be avoided. Russell also mentioned that as people age, their ratio of water to body fat changes and we dehydrate more quickly, as a result.

If you believe someone is suffering from heat stroke or heat exhaustion, do not hesitate: Call 911. While waiting for help, move the person to a shaded area or inside to a cool area. Loosen any tight clothing. Put cold packs or a cool cloth under the armpits and on the neck.

"Immerse them in a bathtub of cool water, then use convection (air flow over the body, such as with a fan) to cause evaporation to lower the body temperature," said Russell.

Watching out for four-legged friends

Pets can suffer from heat-related illnesses, too. And they can be fatal.

Carol Vencill, president of the Wallowa County Humane Society, said prevention of heat-related illnesses is the key, but "once it happens, they need medical attention ASAP."

Dogs pant to keep themselves cool and sweat through the pads on their feet. However, signs of excessive heat exposure include drooling, overly panting and lethargy. Severe signs include seizures, fever, vomiting, lack of coordination and difficulty breathing. Any or all of these, could require a trip to the vet for evaluation.

Some animals — the very young, old, those animals who are ill or breeds with short muzzles (i.e., pugs or boxers) — are more prone to heat-related illnesses.

"Luckyly we don't see too many cases of heat stroke," Severin Knudsen, owner of the Enterprise Animal Hospital, said.

The normal temperature for a dog is between 100 and 102 degrees Fahr-

enheit. Knudsen said problems occur when the dog's temperature gets to be 106 or more and proteins in the brain start to break down.

At 109-110 degrees, heat stroke, the dog is "completely unaware of their surroundings — their brain is breaking down. We have yet to see a true, severe heat stroke from a dog being locked in a car," he said.

Signs of heat stroke can come on when a dog is playing or hiking. Owners should be aware and pay attention for the early signs of heat stroke in a dog such as "seeking shade and water. Be very attentive to the animal," he said. He said he has seen some cases of "mild heat stroke — where dogs are playing on a hot day" and they will develop diarrhea.

Treatment for heat stroke in animals includes moving the animal into the shade or an air-conditioned area, applying ice packs to the arm pits, or cold towels to the head, neck and chest area or running cool (not cold) water over them. Allow them to drink small amounts of water or lick ice chips. Take them to the vet because, "we can do things they (the owners) can't," to help pets cool down quickly and recover from heat stroke.

Vencill said there are several ways to keep your pet cool in the heat.

"Spray bottles — which are more for dogs than cats, can help. So can wet towels. Laying them over a dog's back, or wiping their face is a way to cool them. Indoors a box fan works well," she said.

Another tip Vencill said helps keep a dog cool is to provide ice packs under a couple of layers of towel or a soft pet bed, so it doesn't come into direct contact with the pet's skin.

"That gives much relief," she said.

She said it is important to make sure the dog can't dig out or chew on the ice packs.

Some people shave their dogs during the summer months, thinking this will keep their pets cool. Vencill advises owners to be mindful of the fact that pets can get sunburned just as people get sunburned.

"Don't take it down too short," she said.

Pets can also get skin cancer, she said.

Other prevention tips include exercising or walking your pet in the morning or early evening when it is cooler, walking on the grass instead of the hot asphalt and always carrying water to prevent dehydration.

Pets should always have a source of cool, clean, fresh water. Vencill says a child's wading pool helps relieve a lot of heat stress for dogs. There should also be a source of shelter or shade for animals to get out of the sun. A doghouse does not provide relief from the heat, and can make matters worse.

Dogs and cats are not the only animals that need help

with the hot weather. Livestock, such as horses, donkeys and mules also need mineral blocks.

The other thing Vencill said she sees is dogs riding around in the beds of pick-up trucks. The metal beds of pick-ups can become extremely hot and burn the bottoms of a dog's feet. To remedy this, keep a rug or blanket in the bed of the pick-up for the dog to lay on.

When it comes to leaving your dog in a car on a hot day, it goes without saying this is a big no-no. Even for a minute. Even with the windows cracked or rolled down. The temperature in a car can rise 20 degrees every 10 minutes.

What should you do if you see an animal in a locked vehicle on a hot day? What are you legally allowed to do?

In 2017, Oregon became the 11th state to pass a "Good Samaritan Law." The law expanded protection for companion animals by providing that anyone — not just law enforcement — may enter a motor vehicle by force or otherwise to remove an unattended child or domestic animal without fear of criminal or civil liability as long as certain requirements are met.

What are those requirements?

First, there must be a reasonable belief that the animal or child is in imminent danger of suffering harm.

Second, the person must notify law enforcement or emergency services either before, or shortly after entering the vehicle.

Third, the person must use only the minimal force necessary to enter the vehicle.

Finally, the person must stay with the child or animal until law enforcement or emergency services, or the owner or operator of the vehicle, arrives.

According to Enterprise Chief of Police Kevin McQuead, Wallowa County has seen "two calls over the last several weeks," of dogs locked in parked cars. Although McQuead admits the Good Samaritan Law is "a beautiful thing," he would prefer people contact law enforcement rather than take matters into their own hands if they see a pet or child locked in a car.

He points out that there is always an officer on duty who can help and, "we have tools that can open doors without breaking windows," he said.

Knudsen said there are two overarching things he wants people to remember about their pets and hot weather.

When it comes to cars and pets and leaving your pet in the car: "Just don't," he said. And, when it comes to outdoor activity, be mindful of your pet and their activity level, "pay attention and don't push it."

By following these few simple tips, you, your family and your pets can enjoy a safe and happy summer.

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