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Keeping the Elderly Safe during Summer Heat Waves
Health Care Council of Illinois provides tips for protecting seniors

When temperatures and humidity rise, Illinois nursing homes go on alert. Seniors are particularly susceptible to serious health complications from hot weather, including heat exhaustion, heatstroke, sunburns and dehydration. The Health Care Council of Illinois (HCCI), an association of nursing home professionals, offers valuable tips to the public on how to keep seniors safe and comfortable during this summer's heat wave.

"Many seniors are on medications such as diuretics that make them more prone to the burning rays of the sun," said Susan Duda-Gardiner, director of clinical services speaking on behalf of HCCI. "Just a short period of time in the sun can cause some major health complications."

Based on the expertise nursing home professionals have gained in serving the elderly, the Health Care Council of Illinois recommends everyone take the following steps to protect seniors from extreme heat:

- Use an air conditioner to keep rooms cool. If air conditioning is unavailable, open windows on opposite ends of the house or building to cross-ventilate and increase air flow.
- Regularly attend to individuals who are most at risk for heat-related illnesses, including elderly with heart, circulatory and pulmonary conditions. Many medicines, including those used for heart conditions, depression and allergies, also can make a person more sensitive to heat stress.
- Ensure that seniors are wearing light-colored, loose-fitting clothing that allows the body to release heat.
- A senior should always wear sun block when going outside, even if for a short period of time. Apply sunscreen one-half hour before heading outdoors. Not all clothes protect against sun exposure, so apply sunscreen liberally to all exposed areas, including under the sleeves and collar of a shirt or blouse.
- Wearing a hat that shades the face and covers the head is advised when spending time outdoors. Seniors who are sensitive to the sun should also cover their legs and refrain from wearing shorts.
- Seniors should always wear their sunglasses outdoors. Remember that the eyes of a senior take a longer time to adjust from light to dark. When going indoors, a senior should take off his or her sunglasses before entering the building to prevent an accident. It also is a good idea for a senior to pause for several moments once inside the door, so that his or her eyes will have time to adjust to the diminished light.

One of the most important pieces of advice is that seniors should drink plenty of liquids during the hot summer months to make up for the loss of fluids due to sweat. Dehydration is a dangerous problem that can easily lead to hospitalization and become life-threatening to an elderly person.

As persons age, their sense of thirst decreases and by the time an elderly person feels thirsty, he or she may already be dehydrated. Common symptoms of dehydration include confusion, poor skin elasticity, cracked lips, a dry mouth and a furrowed tongue.

The best form of hydration is drinking water. Stay away from drinks with caffeine because these beverages dehydrate the body. Seniors should consider carrying water bottles with them, such as those used by athletes, while spending time outdoors. On a regular basis, be sure to refill this bottle with water or a favorite non-caffeinated beverage to stay healthy. Seniors should always check with their physician to ensure that an increase in fluids is not medically contraindicated.

Sometimes seniors need reminders from family members, friends and caregivers to help them stay well-hydrated. Be sure to offer a variety of delicious beverages throughout the day to protect the health of a loved one, including offering a full glass of water to a senior when taking medications.

Additionally, all seniors and their caregivers should be aware of this season's very dangerous heat-related illnesses, including:

- **Heat Exhaustion** is produced by the loss of normal fluids and salts in the body and results from exposure to heat, either indoors or outdoors. Some of the common symptoms of heat exhaustion include cool, clammy skin; a body temperature of up to 103 degrees; weak, rapid pulse; shallow and quiet respirations; and muscles that may be tense or contracted.

Treatment includes keeping the individual quiet, resting in a cool place and increasing intake of cool, non-alcoholic and non-caffeinated fluids. Consult a physician immediately if you believe an elder may be suffering from heat exhaustion.

- **Heatstroke** is a more serious heat-related illness resulting from direct exposure to high temperatures or the sun. Heatstroke commonly affects individuals who are debilitated or fatigued. Symptoms include dizziness, weakness, nausea, spots before the eyes, ringing in the ears, bright red dry skin, rapid, strong pulse, and a body temperature of more than 103 degrees.

Treatment may include cooling off the individual, removing clothing, applying cool cloths, and giving him or her a sponge bath. Direct the individual to the nearest hospital emergency room as soon as possible, if you notice any of these symptoms.

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The Health Care Council of Illinois (HCCI) is a professional association of more than 500 nursing facilities committed to quality residential health care in Illinois through a productive and responsible partnership between the private and public sectors. HCCI represents more than 80,000 nursing home professionals serving more than 80,000 residents.