

Beat the Heat

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Getting too hot isn't just uncomfortable! It can make you really sick or even kill you. Getting sick from the heat can ALWAYS be prevented, too. Children react to heat differently than adults, so it is important for everyone in charge of young athletes to know what to watch for and how to prevent heat illness. (Of course, YOU knew equestrians are athletes even if other people don't.)

How are children different? They are not just miniature adults. Children absorb more heat from the sun and the environment than do adults. They don't sweat as much and can't transfer heat to the skin as fast. They don't adapt to climate changes as fast. Children do not instinctively drink more fluids or limit their efforts in the heat. They don't usually complain as much as adults, either! Young athletes are famous for pushing themselves beyond their physical limits.

People get sick from the heat when they make or absorb more heat than their bodies can get rid of. Humans get rid of excess heat mostly by transferring it to the skin by blood flow. The heat then radiates away from the body. This doesn't work if the air is hotter than you are! The rest of heat loss is by evaporation of sweat. If the humidity is high, sweat won't evaporate and you get wet but not cool.

If body heat builds up to 104 degrees, all systems are maxed out and any further rise results in serious problems. Since so much blood is going to the skin to try to cool the body, not enough is circulating to other organs like the muscles, intestines, kidneys, and brain. Not having enough water in your system (being dehydrated) also decreases circulation. Your legs may get wobbly or

cramp up, you get sick at your stomach, are really crabby and probably have a headache. You may get really confused and not think clearly – obviously not good around a horse! If you don't get cooled off in a hurry, you could have seizures or go into a coma.

The best way to treat heat illness is not to get it in the first place! Making sure your body has a "full tank" before you start is critical. Eating and drinking normally in the days before activity plus loading up with one-half to one quart of fluid before exercising ensures that fluid and electrolytes are normal to start with. Drinking six to eight ounces of water every 15 minutes while exercising in hot or very dry weather will keep your fluid tank topped off. The best fluid is refrigerator-temperature water. Sodas, juices, and sports drinks sit in your stomach longer and should NOT be used during exercise. The normal American diet (and we won't even think about the typical teen diet) contains far more salt than humans need. Taking extra electrolytes can be dangerous.

Common sense helps, too. Dress for the heat. Heavy wool coats might be perfect for a cold winter day in foggy England (which is where the tradition came from), but in the United States, Pony Club members often ride in the hot sun. An Arab's loose flowing robes are much better adapted to the heat! Clothing should be light colored, light weight, and keep the sun off the skin. It should be loose, and the fabric should wick moisture away from the skin. Heads count, too! White hats with big vent holes are much cooler. Remove coats, hats, and vests when not mounted.

If you are planning an activity, remember to think about the heat. When the weather is hot, plan riding for early, late, or even under lights. Do Horse Management, not cross country, during the hottest part of the day and do it under a big tree or in an air-conditioned room. Water should be available wherever you are. Even during mounted activities, take lots of breaks in the shade. Kids and mounts both benefit from being hosed off regularly, too. Kids may need to remind adults that they need to “keep cool” – Don’t be shy.

Some people are more likely to overheat. If you are one of these be SURE the adult in charge knows this. Someone who has had heat illness in the past is more likely to have it again. Certain drugs such as allergy medicines, “water pills,” Ritalin and other stimulants, heart and blood pressure medicines, alcohol, and street drugs keep your body from dealing properly with heat. Ask your doctor about any medicine you take. Having medical problems like cystic fibrosis, being really overweight or out of shape, having a fever or stomach flu, having heart problems, or being mentally challenged increase the risk of heat illness.

OK, so it’s 92 degrees and 98 percent humidity. Somebody wasn’t careful, and now your teammate is complaining of a headache, feels like throwing up, and bites off your head when you ask when she rides next. What’s wrong? No, it’s not show nerves. She has heat exhaustion and could develop heat stroke. She needs fluids and to be cooled down NOW! Stop activity immediately and get her into the shade. A nice breeze, fan or air conditioning would help. Loosen clothing and remove nonessentials such as hat or gloves. Offer lots of cool water both to drink and to cool the skin. If she seems confused, the skin is hot and dry, or she is not feeling better quickly this may be heat stroke and medical

assistance is needed immediately. Apply ice or running water and get help. **THIS IS A LIFE THREATENING EMERGENCY.**

Remember, heat illness is common. It can kill and **IT IS ALWAYS PREVENTABLE.** It is the responsibility of the adults in charge to be sure heat illness doesn’t occur, but it is also the responsibility of young athletes to be aware of the dangers and to know how to keep themselves from becoming seriously overheated. Particular attention should be directed toward prevention of heat illnesses. Unlimited cool water must be constantly available for consumption. Coats and stocks or neck ties should be removed as the relative humidity and apparent temperature rise