

High temperatures and humidity bring risk of heat-related illness

By Beverly Pettigrew Kraft

An overheated field trip participant hurried down the side of a rock pile, sat briefly, then headed to the shade with her spouse.



Under the tent, Mom's elastic hair tie felt sticky, like it was melting, even though she had been in the shade for several hours. Rocks were too hot to put into my pocket.

The noon temperature climbed to the high 90s during the July 23 field trip to the Hammett gravel pit near Redwood. Even though the site yielded abundant finds, we had to quit earlier than usual. It was simply too hot to continue safely.

Heat stress during the June outing put a member in the hospital for three days.

Tips for coping with the heat are always part of our field trip preparation, but caution is worth repeating. Heat exhaustion can ruin your day, and a heat stroke is life-threatening.

Symptoms of heat exhaustion include heavy sweating, rapid heartbeat, pale skin, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headache, muscle or abdominal cramps, fatigue, fainting, dizziness and confusion, according to WebMD. People most at risk for heat exhaustion include the elderly, very young children, high blood pressure sufferers and those with other illnesses.

Quick action is necessary so that heat exhaustion doesn't progress to heat stroke. It is imperative to reduce body temperature. Get out of the sun and get to a cool place immediately. Drink plenty of fluid to rehydrate. Loosen tight clothing and remove unnecessary layers. Lie down and elevate feet. Apply cold towels if a cool shower or bath is not available.

A few years ago, MGMS members put a fellow into the creek to cool him off when he became dangerously overheated.

Seek medical attention if symptoms worsen.

If you stop sweating and start shivering, you need to find a cool spot and help.

Signs of a heat stroke include body temperature above 103 degrees; red, hot and dry skin; strong, rapid pulse; a throbbing headache; dizziness; nausea; confusion; and unconsciousness. In addition to administering cooling measures, seek immediate medical attention.

Life-threatening heat stroke occurs when the body becomes unable to regulate temperature, according to the Center for Disease Control. Body temperature rises rapidly, and sweating doesn't provide adequate cooling. Brain damage can occur at such elevated temperatures.

High humidity increases the chance of heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Sweating is the body's cooling mechanism. In high humidity, sweat does not evaporate as quickly, which means the body does not dissipate heat effectively.

Increasing fluid intake a day or two before a field trip may help prepare your body and ward off dehydration. Medical authorities recommend that you drink about 16 ounces of water or sports drinks several hours before starting activity in high heat. Don't wait until you feel parched with thirst. WebMD recommends taking a water break every 20 minutes. Exercise in hot, humid conditions can lead to dehydration in as little as 30 minutes.

The Kraft tent offers cold water and sports drinks as well as a shady place to visit during field trips. Drinks are free. Please drink plenty of fluids.

