

UC Monthly Safety Spotlight, May 2012

Avoiding Heat-Related Illness and Injury

Careless Chris Has a Narrow Escape with Heat...an Imaginary Scenario

Fictitious employee Careless Chris awoke to a warm, lovely August day. It was Saturday and Chris was enthusiastic about her upcoming trip to the county fair later that morning. She had plans to meet up with her friends Carla and Monica and their children to enjoy the exhibits, the rides and all the festivities.

She ate a quick breakfast, took a shower and put on a new outfit that she just purchased a few days before. The weather forecast predicted a hot, humid day, but Chris was determined to wear her new and trendy jacket made from dark blue, recycled denim. "So it will be hot," she thought as she fed the cat and got ready to leave. "Heat has never bothered me anyway."

By the time she drove into the gravel parking lot in mid-morning, the temperature was already 85 degrees and the day was turning out to be humid and muggy. Chris soon found her friends and spent the next few hours enjoying the events. She went on rides with the kids, ate cotton candy, watched a contra dance performance and sang with her friends on a karaoke stage. Overall, she was having a great time, though her heavy, long-sleeved outfit began to feel uncomfortable as the day grew warmer over the noon hour.

At lunch, she and her friends indulged in rich fairgrounds food and Chris had two glasses of beer with the meal. It was fun all around, but after lunch the group decided it was time to call it a day. Chris looked a bit flushed, so her friend Carla asked if she was feeling all right. Chris reassured her that she felt fine and was ready to tackle the 45-minute drive home.

Chris said good-bye to her friends at about 1:30 and headed off to the parking lot. At that point, the temperature stood at 96 degrees and the humidity made it feel even hotter. Chris found the fair exit and began to search for her car. Unfortunately, she had used the exit that was farthest from where her car was located. Hundreds of cars were lined up under the baking sun, seemingly as far as she could see. "I can't believe this!" she thought as she walked up one aisle and down another. "Did somebody steal my car, or what?"

After 20 minutes of increasingly uncomfortable walking, Chris finally found her car. She felt headachy, nauseous and disoriented. With a feeling of relief, she unlocked the car and got in. The car felt like an oven, but Chris was overcome with fatigue and decided she would just sit down for a quick nap. She rolled down the windows hoping for a breeze to cool her down, and closed her eyes.

Chris woke up suddenly, feeling intense cold all over her body. She realized she was in an emergency room, where the staff was applying cool, wet compresses to her body to bring down her temperature. She remained in the hospital for four hours while the staff stabilized her temperature, performed blood tests and monitored her vital signs.

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The emergency room physician told Chris she was being treated for heat stroke. “Your body temperature was 105 degrees,” she said. “The temperature of the car you were sitting in was probably around 150 degrees when someone saw you and called 9-1-1 when you didn’t respond to their questions. You were very lucky. Heat stroke can cause permanent injury if you aren’t treated quickly. It can even be fatal.” Chris immediately checked with her friends and was relieved to hear that they and the children were fine. She made a follow-up appointment with her own physician for the next day.

That night, Chris had some sobering thoughts about her experience with severe heat exposure. She reflected on the judgment lapses that had landed her in the emergency room. To begin with, she should have taken the dangers of heat and humidity seriously and prepared accordingly. Lightweight, light-colored and loose-fitting clothing, as well as a wide-brimmed hat, would have been more appropriate for the day. So would staying out of the sun, drinking cool water throughout the day and cutting down on strenuous activity. Rich, sugary foods and alcohol dehydrate the body and contribute to the effects of high heat, so they were also a mistake. Considering the heat and humidity of the day, it would have been a good idea for the whole group to cut the county fair visit short and opt for an indoor activity in an air-conditioned area.

Chris also realized that she should have called for help when the symptoms of nausea, confusion and fatigue appeared, rather than sitting in an overheated vehicle. She decided to take it easy for a few days, and made a commitment to take much better care of herself the next time she ventured out on a hot day.