

Play in the Sun All Summer Long

By Dr. Keith Overland, Norwalk Chiropractic

As all New Englanders know, weather in the summer months is quite unpredictable. We have thunderstorms one minute and sun the next. It may rain every weekend or be hazy, hot, and humid for days on end. As active outdoor athletes, as odd as it may sound, the weather can actually play a large role in your performance and even threaten your health and safety during a workout.

Two of the most important health issues every athlete must pay attention to are the following:

1. Prolonged skin exposure to the sun.
2. Fluid and mineral losses that can diminish athletic performance and manifest into heat illness.

The well-known short-term effects of sun exposure are often skin redness and sunburn. However, too many of us will simply ignore those skin injuries and not make the connection that they are in fact hastening the long-term effects of exposure. These effects include the increased risk of what Carol Otis, MD calls photo aging (wrinkles, loss of elasticity, discoloration, and cancer and malignant melanoma). From 1935 to 2001, the risk of developing this type of skin cancer in America jumped from 1 in 1500 to 1 in 71.

There are many forms of sun protection and as an athlete exposed for hours at a time, there simply are no excuses for not taking the proper precautions. The most common protective measure is the use of sunscreen.

A sunscreen product must be able to protect your skin from both UVA and UVB solar radiation. Both are dangerous. In order to do so the product should have a SPF rating of at least 30 and include on the label zinc oxide, titanium dioxide and avobenzone or Parsol 1789. You should put sunscreen everywhere the sun rays might come in contact with your skin – including your forehead and face, your ears, the back of your legs, the back of your neck, and any bald area on the top of your head.

Although applying sunscreen is useful in solar radiation protection, according to Ronald Moy, MD, and Carol Otis, MD, combining it with behavioral protection is a much more effective process. Because sunscreen does not protect 100 percent of UV radiation, changing your behavior in the sun is an essential aspect of prevention.

Otis and Moy suggest the following:

1. Avoid playing in direct sunlight between 10 am and 2 pm.
2. Wear clothing that is impenetrable to light. One such product is Solumbra Sun Precautions (www.sunprotections.com).
3. Wear hats and visors.
4. Even on the days the sun is not shining brightly, you should protect your skin during activity. The UV rays are still present even on a cloudy day.

Whether it's sunny or cloudy, humid or dry, another summer health hazard you need to prevent is dehydration. Heat illnesses are seen far more frequently than one would expect. In mild cases it may show up as dizziness, a mild headache, or even

nausea. In extreme cases, you may experience profuse sweating; cool, clammy skin; muscle cramps, and even a weak, rapid pulse.

Consistent and adequate fluid consumption is an athlete's best bet for beating dehydration. She encourages 5-10 oz. of fluid (sports drinks with carbohydrates and electrolytes) every 15-20 minutes. Normal water is fine as long as you have eaten a nutritionally balanced meal.

To guard against heat-related illnesses here are some general guidelines to follow:

1. To prevent your core body temperature from rising too high, wear clothing that allows you to perspire.
2. Have enough fluid in your body before your match. On average this amounts to 18 oz. two hours before you play. If you play more than an hour, you should replace electrolytes with a drink that includes them. Fluids cooler than the air temperature are ideal for cooling you off after playing.
3. If you must be active in very hot weather, acclimate yourself to it gradually by playing short amounts of time and build up slowly.
4. Within 30 minutes of finishing your workout you should consume a high carbohydrate drink or snack.

In dealing with intense weather conditions of a New England summer, using simple common sense can make playing outdoors a lot of fun. Taking the necessary precautions will allow you to enjoy your activity, perform your best, and reduce chances of many preventable illnesses.