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Departments of Human Services and Health Offer Cooling Tips

PITTSBURGH – The Allegheny County Departments of Human Services and Health today encouraged residents to stay cool and take precautions from the heat as temperatures this week are expected to be in the upper 80s and lower 90s. Those especially prone to heat-related illnesses are the elderly, and residents are urged to check on older neighbors and relatives.

“All county residents ages 60 and older are welcome to visit any of the county-funded senior centers during regular hours of operation to socialize and enjoy activities while taking refuge from the heat,” said Human Services Director Marc Cherna. “Our centers offer meals, creative and educational programming, and social activities, and are a great way to cool down during the day.”

For a list of all Allegheny County senior centers, visit www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/seniorcenters.aspx.

The Area Agency on Aging (AAA) and its contracted providers will maintain contact with frail, isolated and high-risk seniors who are registered for care management with AAA. Care managers will respond to emergency needs as they arise, making sure that seniors are safe and stable. However, not all elderly citizens are registered for care management with AAA and, therefore, may need to be checked on by neighbors, friends or relatives. The following are tips offered to those who plan to check on seniors:

- Offer a glass of water or a non-alcoholic, non-caffeinated beverage. Sit with them as they drink it. If plain water is boring, try one of the no-calorie fruit flavored waters.
- Check for breathing difficulty or other signs of distress, such as swelling of the ankles, or disorientation. Seek medical attention if needed, or simply call a medical professional for advice.
- Check to see that window air conditioning units are operating in good order. If there is no air conditioning, make sure that there is good cross-ventilation, aided by fans.
- Check to see that they are eating. If they are not eating because of lack of appetite, try offering light protein-laden foods, such as fully cooked eggs, cottage cheese or lentils.

If seniors resist visits, encourage them to agree to a few telephone calls each day, but pay attention to whether the person sounds alert, and if they can tell you which medicines they have taken. If they are willing, invite them to stay with you for a few days until the difficult weather passes.

“Heat-related illnesses are caused when an individual’s body cannot regulate its temperature,” said Health Department Director Dr. Karen Hacker. “During days of extreme heat be sure to drink plenty of water, wear light-weight clothing, and stay indoors in a cool, air-conditioned area.”

Heat exhaustion is the body’s response to an excessive loss of water and salt contained in sweat. Warning signs include heavy sweating, paleness, muscle cramps, fatigue, dizziness, headache, nausea or vomiting and fainting. Seek medical attention immediately, if the symptoms are severe or if the person has heart problems or high blood pressure. Otherwise, help the victim cool off, and seek medical attention if the symptoms worsen or last longer than one hour.

Heat stroke, a more serious and potentially life-threatening condition, occurs when the body is unable to control its temperature and the sweating mechanism fails. Warning signs may include: an extremely high body temperature (above 103° F); red, hot and dry skin, due to no sweating; a rapid, strong pulse; throbbing headache; dizziness; nausea, confusion; and unconsciousness. Death or permanent disability may result without emergency treatment. Cool the victim rapidly by any means available until paramedics arrive.

Additionally, the following precautions are recommended to minimize the risk of heat-related illness:

- Stay cool indoors, preferably in an air-conditioned environment. Fans don’t help much when temperatures are in the 90s. A cool bath or shower is a more effective way to cool off, if you don’t have air conditioning. Better yet, visit someplace that does, such as a senior center, theater, mall or neighbor’s house.
- Drink plenty of fluids, at least eight cups a day, but not alcoholic or caffeinated drinks which actually cause you to lose more fluids. Avoid hot foods and heavy meals, which add heat to your body.
- Wear lightweight, light-colored and loose-fitting clothing. A wide-brimmed hat provides shade and helps keep the head cool. Sunscreen can prevent sunburn, which can affect your body’s ability to cool itself and also cause a loss of body fluids.
- Avoid strenuous physical activity, particularly during the hotter part of the day.
- Never leave a child, or a pet, in a vehicle alone on a hot day. A child may become disoriented in just five minutes, unconscious in 10 and brain-damaged in 20.
- Use the buddy system and check on the elderly and the infirm who do not have air conditioning and are less able to take care of themselves.

More tips for keeping cool are located on the Allegheny County Department of Human Services website at www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/cooling-tips.aspx, and on the Health Department’s website at <http://www.achd.net/pr/heattips.html>.

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