



MedStar Health

Sports medicine **monthly.**

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Sun safety

The ultraviolet (UV) index is highest in spring and summer, so the risk of sun-related damage is highest this time of year. And aside from the short- and long-term dangers of sun exposure, the heat this time of year can lead to other health risks, especially if you push yourself too hard outside.

This can be particularly important to remember if you have kids who are participating in summer sports practices or camps or gearing up for the upcoming season. As a result, it's important to take extra precautions to keep your kids safe as they exercise and play sports while it is hot and humid. Here's what you need to know.

Help them hydrate before they even exercise.

Hydration alone will not prevent heat illness but it can help the body to regulate its temperature. You may have heard that the average body needs at least eight to ten eight-ounce glasses per day to function properly. But this doesn't take into account whether or not you are exercising, the intensity of your exercise, and how much you sweat. Once you start to add exercise and heat to the equation, your kids will need more.

Bathroom habits may not be a fun topic of conversation, but urine color can be a good indicator of whether or not you are hydrated. If your child's urine is light-colored before they exercise, they are likely hydrated enough to go out and hit the pavement running. If it's darker, you should encourage them to drink more fluids before going out into the heat.

Rather than counting glasses, consider having them carry around a water bottle and consume one in the morning, one in the afternoon, and one in the evening...and fill it up more as they exercise. If they are vigorously training or exercising for more than 45 minutes outdoors, you may want to talk to your doctor about the benefits of drinking fluids with electrolytes.

Don't neglect sunscreen and protective clothing.

The last thing kids are thinking about when putting on their athletic gear is sunscreen, but it's critical they wear it every time they're out playing their sport in the sun. The risk of skin cancer is significantly higher for those who experience severe and repeated sunburns and overexposure while they're young.

Any area of the body that is exposed to the sun should be lathered with a broad-spectrum sunscreen that is SPF 30 or higher. SPF stands for sun protection factor and it measures the amount that a sunscreen will block UVB light. In other words, the higher the number, the greater the degree of protection.

There are several different types of sunscreens with different ingredients but the best kind is the one your child is willing to wear. Both mineral sunscreens and chemical sunscreens are effective at blocking the sun, but the youngest athletes, we recommend mineral sunscreens because those blockers sit on the skin and aren't absorbed into the bloodstream. Don't forget to apply sunscreen to the tips of the ears, nose, and even their hair part on the scalp—wherever the skin is exposed. No matter what SPF you choose, you should reapply at least every two hours or after they've been in the water.

If your child participates in water or boating sports, the sun can be particularly damaging because of its reflection off water. But even on the track or field, polarized sunglasses and protective hats, visors, and clothing can help to shield the skin and eyes from sun damage.



When should I take my child to the doctor for a bad burn?

If your child gets a bad sunburn, don't pop the blister. The skin acts as a natural barrier or bandaid to the blister, so leave it intact until it pops naturally. A cool compress can be helpful but be careful to avoid putting ice directly on the skin. A fragrance-free moisturizer can also help to alleviate discomfort.

If the blister covers a large portion of their skin, you should take them to see a doctor. You should also seek medical attention if you notice any signs of infection, such as:

- Spreading or streaking redness
- Fever
- Puss or discharge
- Chills
- Fainting
- Severe skin pain

When can they get back outside to play their sport?

You should always take precautions to prevent more sun damage, especially after they've had a sunburn. When everything has healed up and there's no redness, pain, or blisters, it's okay to go back out in the sun with caution, wearing sun-protective clothing, using sunscreen with high SPF, and reapplying often.

Help your kids acclimatize to the heat and humidity.

Many people struggle to acclimate to exercising outdoors in the heat at the beginning of summer when they aren't yet used to it. This can lead to dangerous heat-related illnesses, like heat exhaustion and heat stroke. As the summer goes on, our bodies naturally adjust to the temperature and humidity, but we're still at risk for overheating or getting burnt while exercising in the sun.

As your kids prepare to return to school and fall sports programs, we don't want them to go to their first football or track practice without having trained in the summer heat. They should be participating in some form of outdoor exercise over the summer in a safe and controlled environment, like earlier in the day or in the evening.

Practices should be structured with the coaching staff so they're not going out for two-a-day practices in the hot sun on the first day of training. This can also help to minimize injuries related to overuse. Kids should also have free access to water and sports drinks and be allowed breaks when it's hot. Coaches should be monitoring the temperature so when it's extremely hot and humid, they shouldn't be out in the middle of the turf field at 2 o'clock in the afternoon.

Advocate for your kid's safety.

Make sure your athlete's coaches, schools, and teams have a heat safety plan in place. Sports programs should have certified athletic trainers on-site at every high-school, as these trained healthcare professionals can help activate those heat safety plans when needed. Recreational and travel programs may be less well-versed in the safety recommendations that many schools follow, so you may have to be the one to bring extra water and fans, or request shade or a different time of day so the athletes are playing safely.

Don't let fear of sun or heat-related dangers prevent you from getting your kids outside to exercise. Just encourage them to wear sunscreen, drink water, rest when they need to, and have fun!