



Frequently Asked Questions – Hyperthermia

Hyperthermia is a condition that occurs when a body's thermostat is overloaded by heat. It can happen to people of all ages. The most severe form of hyperthermia is heat stroke. Symptoms may include dizziness, disorientation, agitation, confusion, rapid heartbeat or hallucinations. It can be prevented by keeping a person cool and hydrated.

Who is affected by hyperthermia?

Children are at great risk for this, because a child's body heats up three to five times faster than an adult's. When the body temperature reaches 104 degrees, the internal organs start to shut down. A body temperature around 107 degrees is fatal.

Why are we hearing so much about this now?

We are coming into the warm and hot weather seasons across the country. Weather experts tell us we are having longer warm-weather seasons and that it is expected to continue. When the sun is out, and sometimes even on cloudy days, the inside of a car heats up much faster than the temperature outside. In just 20 minutes, the car can heat up by 29 degrees. On a day when the temperature is just 80 degrees, the inside of a closed car could reach 109 degrees in just 20 minutes. Cracking a window does little to keep the inside of a car cool.

Why are children at such great risk in cars?

When young children are unattended in cars there is no one there to be sure the inside temperature is safe for them. Children are unattended in cars in one of three ways: 1) In over half the cases (51 percent), they are "forgotten" by a very distracted driver often because of a change in routine; 2) In about 30 percent of cases, they climb into an unlocked car or trunk to play and are overcome by heat and can't climb out; and 3) In about 20 percent of cases, they are intentionally left alone by a driver running an errand.

How many children die from hyperthermia or heatstroke?

An average of 38 children die this way every year. Last year, however, 49 children died – the record high since records have been kept. The first two deaths occurred when the temperature outside was just 73 and 72 degrees. It does not have to be hot outside for the car to heat up to a dangerous level. Light pouring through the windows of the car stays within the car, and cracking a window does little or nothing to let heat escape.

(More information on back.)



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How can a driver be sure not to “forget” a child in the back seat?

The best way to be sure you never inadvertently leave a child in the car is to leave something you will need at the destination on the floor of the back seat. This could be a cell phone, purse, briefcase, gym bag or something else you always carry. You can set your office computer to ask the question, “Did you drop off at daycare today?” Arrange to have your daycare provider call if you are more than a half hour late with your child. It is not hard to become distracted when you are a new, sleep-deprived parent or when your routine is disrupted (you don’t usually drop off at daycare but are doing it for this one day).

Are there other dangers to unattended children in cars?

Yes, children have been known to put a car in gear, wander away from the car or be kidnapped.

What should people do to avoid hyperthermia for their children?

The best thing to do is to NEVER LEAVE YOUR CHILD ALONE IN A CAR – not even for a minute. Take your child with you when you leave the vehicle. People have been known to run into a store for milk or meet a neighbor and lose track of time. It takes very little time to place a child at great risk for death or injury when they are alone in a car. Make sure you make it clear to your babysitter that it is never okay to leave your child alone.

What should I do if I see a child alone in a car?

The best thing you can do is to call 911 (EMS) immediately. Wait by the vehicle so EMS can find you quickly. EMS personnel are trained to assess a situation and determine if the child is in serious trouble. If you determine from looking inside the car that the child is severely impaired, you could provide bystander care. Remove the child from the car, and begin to slowly cool and lower the body temperature by using a cool water mist or wipes until help arrives.

How do very young children gain entry to a car?

Many kids gain entry to a car because the trunk or doors are open. Parents should also keep key fobs out of reach of children. Once they get inside, they may be quickly overcome by heat and not know how to problem solve and climb out. People with kids should check to be sure everyone is out of the car before they lock it. Cars always should be locked, even in driveways. People without kids should also lock their doors and trunks to keep neighborhood kids from climbing into their vehicles.

What can I do to help?

First, you can make a personal commitment to never leave your child alone in the car. Second, urge your community to do the same. You can share information by posting flyers at your child’s nursery, school, local grocery or anywhere you can think of. You can also help spread the word by sharing information on your Facebook, Twitter or any other social media profiles. Always remember to check a car FIRST if your child is missing.

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Source: Information obtained from Safe Kids Worldwide at SafeKids.org/nlyca.