

Heat stroke a serious danger

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A memorial has been set up outside a home after a three-year-old girl left alone in a vehicle died in Edmonton on Wednesday, July 3.

According to Raynald Marchand, general manager of the Canada Safety Council, able-bodied adults know how to protect themselves from the heat, but sometimes forget about those who are more vulnerable. "When it comes to a confined space, such as an automobile, and we leave an elderly person, a child or a pet, those may not be survivable events," Marchand said.

"I think people just forget about heat stroke with our long winters. Then we get a nice day and we forget just how high the temperature can rise. We also over-estimate the ability of a child to sweat so that they can control their body heat. Their gland system hasn't developed to the same level as adults and therefore don't sweat like them."

Marchand went on to talk of a situation where a child was left overnight in a car in -21 C weather and, when the morning came, the child was fine. This is not the case when it comes to heat.

"Children can generate heat, they just can't get rid of it," he said. "The body temperature of a child will rise three times as quickly as an adult."

Even if a child is fully hydrated, too hot of an environment can be severely dangerous.

"They drink the water, but they can't sweat it," Marchand explained. "We cool our body temperature by sweating, (but) they can't sweat at the same rate we can."

"Once our body core rises above 40.5 C, we go into an emergency state where the organs within the body start to shut down and death occurs."

According to Marchand, there are some signs that a child is in distress.

"They will become lethargic, maybe sleeping excessively," he said. "They'll be red and try to sweat somehow."

"Heat stroke is a real phenomena. Maybe not as common in Canada as it is in the south, but it is real and it is here."

From Marchand's perspective, there is very rarely any purposeful neglect when it comes to these situations.

"We think about it because we talk about it a lot here (at the Canada Safety Council), but with some people it just doesn't register. If their routine changes, they forget," Marchand said.

"It is the same phenomena when something happens out of the ordinary. What we recommend people do is leave your purse or cellphone in the back seat of the car with the child. Or, take a toy with you into the front seat of the car." The toy or the purse or the phone become mental triggers, Marchand explained. These little things can be the difference between a normal day and a most horrible mistake.

"We certainly do a lot of things that are automated, and because of that we become susceptible to do these things (forget people in hot cars or not take care of vulnerable people in high heat situations)," he said. "In some cases, it can be harmless. In others, it can be deadly."

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