

Hot cars, safe kids

Just a few minutes can be deadly

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Christina Wysock secures her son, Joey Wysock IV, into his...

As summer hits its stride and temperatures soar, the most dangerous place for your child may be inside a car.

On a warm day, a car's interior can reach dangerously high temperatures in just minutes, threatening the lives of babies and children left inside.

Kids and Cars, a nonprofit education and awareness group, estimates that 38 U.S. children die in hot cars annually, with fatalities spiking in recent years.

In more than half of cases, a caregiver "forgets" that the child — often a sleeping baby — is in the car. Others leave a child in the car while running an errand. Children also can get trapped while playing in a car.

Sue Lackmann, coordinator for Safe Kids Lancaster County, which works to prevent child injuries and deaths, says cases of so-called "vehicular heatstroke" have one thing in common: They are preventable.

"People don't really understand that in 10 minutes, a car can heat up so much and a child can actually die," she says.

Sgt. Bill Hickey, a crime prevention officer with the Lancaster City Bureau of Police, says prolonged heat exposure is especially dangerous for children, whose body temperatures rise quickly.

"Children are more susceptible to these heat-related injuries," he says. "A closed vehicle can reach a very dangerous temperature over not so long of a time."

On a 90-degree day, the temperature in a closed car can reach 109 degrees in 10 minutes, 119 degrees in 20 minutes and 124 degrees in 30 minutes, he says.

But it doesn't take record-breaking heat to kill a child, Hickey says. Temperatures in the 80s and even lower can be dangerous. And cracking or even rolling down the car windows doesn't keep kids safe.

Heatstroke occurs when the body can't cool itself, and internal temperature reaches a dangerous level. If a child's temperature rises to 104 degrees, internal organs begin to shut down, Lackmann says. When body temperature hits 107 degrees, a child can die.

A tragedy on the rise

So far this year, 16 U.S. children have died in hot cars, including seven during a 16-day period in May.

Heatstroke deaths don't happen only in the summer or the South. Recent fatalities occurred in Minnesota and Idaho. Eleven Pennsylvania children have died in hot cars since 1990.

"It can happen anywhere," Lackmann says. "Fatalities have been recorded in 11 months of the year in nearly all 50 states."

Kids and Cars' statistics date to 1990, when five heatstroke deaths were reported. The numbers have since soared: Between 29 and 49 deaths have been reported every year since 1998.

The phenomenon of caregivers "forgetting" a child in the back seat and returning later to find the child dead especially appears to be rising.

Nearly all victims are age 3 and under. Kids and Cars notes that babies and young children often fall asleep in their car seats, making them easier to "forget." And rear-facing infant seats look the same from the front seat whether occupied or not.

Very young children trapped in hot cars don't realize the seriousness of the situation and can't free themselves.

Forgetting a child may seem impossible, but according to Kids and Cars, it has happened to a pediatrician, police officer, assistant principal and even a rocket scientist. Change in routine, stress, fatigue and distractions can limit the brain's ability to multitask, the group says.

"Parents and caregivers are distracted," Safe Kids' Lackmann says. "There's so much going on. Everyone's lives are so busy right now."

Heatstroke statistics don't count "near-misses," when a child is rescued from a hot car. Palm Beach County, Fla., alone reported 500 such cases in a single year, Lackmann says.

In June 2006, a local near-miss occurred when a woman left newborn twins in her car while shopping. She told East Lampeter police she only needed a few items and thought it would be easier to leave the babies in the car.

The temperature was around 80 degrees, and the woman cracked a car window. Passersby called police after they noticed one baby crying and the other losing consciousness. The woman returned to her car after 17 minutes.

Preventing a tragedy

Even a minute is too long to leave a child alone in a car, Hickey says. If you're tempted to dash into a store solo, keep this in mind: It's illegal.

"The bottom line is, don't leave kids in a car unattended for any reason," he says. "If you've got to get out of the car, take the child with you."

Kids and Cars recommends taking advantage of drive-thrus at banks, restaurants and pharmacies. When you're filling up, pay at the pump.

Heatstroke can even happen in your own driveway while you're unloading groceries, Hickey says. "Take the child out first, and then unload," he says.

To help you remember that a child is in the car, Lackmann suggests leaving a cellphone or purse in the back seat. Or set a phone alarm to remind you to drop off your child.

Teach your children to never play in a car, and warn them about the dangers of a hot vehicle. Lock the doors when your car is parked, and keep keys out of reach.

"If a child goes missing, check a pool first," Lackmann says. "The second place to look is the car."

If you notice a child alone in a car on a hot day, call the police right away, Hickey says. If necessary, emergency personnel will talk you through freeing and cooling down the child.

"It could possibly be an emergency situation," he says.

BE SAFE: Protect your child in the car

- Back seat: Put your cellphone, employee ID badge, handbag or other important item in the back seat so you have to open the back door when leaving the vehicle.
- Every child should be correctly restrained in the back seat.

- Stuffed animal: Move it from the car seat to the front seat to remind you when your baby is in the back seat.
- Ask your child-care provider to call you within 10 minutes if your child hasn't arrived as scheduled.
- Focus on driving: Avoid cellphone calls and texting when you're behind the wheel.
- Every time you park your vehicle, open the back door to make sure no one is left behind ("Look Before You Lock").
 - *Kids and Cars* (kidsandcars.org)

http://lancasteronline.com/article/local/869211_Hot-cars--safe-kids.html#ixzz2YSrvX1bA