



DID YOU HAVE A CAMP COUNSELOR, A school nurse or—God forbid—a mom who followed you around during the warm-weather months with a first aid kit? One undoubtedly filled with glaring white sunscreen, mosquito repellent and Mercurochrome. And did this same person ruin a perfectly good afternoon by, say, making you wait 30 minutes after eating before letting you into the pool or reciting a list of rules before you could enter the woods?

Well, this month that person is me, your friendly health writer, who has the unenviable job of warning you about the dangers hidden in your agenda of summer fun. Hiking? Watch out for rattlesnakes and poison oak. Boating? Be wary of sun exposure and drowning. Having a garage sale? Be careful you don't disturb a nest of black widows. A backyard barbecue? Yes, you guessed it—food poisoning and wasps.

And by agreeing to this assignment, I'm probably guaranteeing I won't be receiving too many invitations to these types of events. Who wants the wet blanket, the party pooper, glaring suspiciously at the potato salad during the entire family reunion? On the other hand, as that camp counselor and our moms surely knew, you may one day thank me for my grim—but life-saving—information.

Be Prepared

Experts suggest that the time to hear my advice is now, while you're comfortably ensconced in a lawn chair—not when you're actually in trouble. “When you have a rattlesnake bite, it's not the time to page through the rattlesnake kit and read the directions for the first time,” says Judith Alsop, Pharm.D., director of the California Poison Control System. And perhaps the most important things you can know are how to prevent incidents from occurring and whether they require immediate medical attention.

By far the most dangerous situations happen when you are paying less-than-optimal attention. This might be because you are a child, lost in an imaginary game, low to the ground, naively curious and not skilled at getting yourself out of danger. Or it may be because you are caring for a child and not used to it—perhaps your grandkids are here for a week and you've lost that extra sense of vigilance you had instinctually as a parent. Or maybe it's because you're deliberately blotting out reality with a combination of high-intensity sun and high-intensity cocktails. “The most likely rattlesnake victim is a male in his 20s who's been drinking,” says Alsop, and the same often holds true in boating and

Fun Busters

SACRAMENTO magazine's friendly health writer casts a shadow on summer fun and warns us of some dangers to avoid. *by thea marie rood*

water accidents as well. The best advice: Be aware of your environment at all times, whether you're in the woods, on the water, by the pool or in your own backyard.

Finally, know what is life threatening and what isn't. Rushing to the emergency room with a sunburn, for example, may mean you spend a lot of time reading old issues of *Time*, but delaying the same trip after a snake bite might have dire consequences. (I've been assured by experts, however, that the venom of the Northern Pacific rattlers we have here is not very toxic—you may spend three or four days in the hospital, but you most likely won't die, as long as you get professional help within an hour after the bite.) As for black widows, it's probably good to know that in most bites, venom is not injected, and when it is, it is almost never lethal—it is instead merely uncomfortable and terrifying. “Adults go wild with anxiety,” says Alsop, noting that minutes after the bite, victims are somberly describing heart palpitations, dizziness and nausea—all symptoms of emotional distress, but not spider poison.

So, before the fun starts, bone up on the details that you hopefully won't need—but may be glad you know. Oh, and I'm most likely free on the Fourth of July, in case you'd like me to attend your gathering in person . . .

know your enemy

symptoms

prevention

fun buster

important things to know

treatment

Listen for warning rattle and watch for snakes sunning themselves—never put your hand on a sunny surface that you can't see first (if you're rock-climbing, for example). Also, carry a walking stick while hiking to ward off a strike. Never grab what you think is a floating branch in the water—rattlers are good swimmers. If you're going to an isolated area, go with a partner, carry a cell phone and know where the nearest ranger station or other emergency help is. And remember: *Snakes always have the right of way.*

Rattlesnake bites cause blood-clotting problems and destroy tissue at the site of the bite—symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, chills, dizziness, tingling of the mouth or tongue, muscle spasms and change in heart rate and blood pressure.

Calm the victim; gently wash the area with soap and water; apply a cold, wet cloth over the bite; go directly to the nearest emergency room. If you are in the wilderness, carry a Sawyer Extractor snakebite kit, which can extract half the venom from the wound with a syringe that exerts reverse pressure. (This buys you time but is not a substitute for treatment in the emergency room.)

1. *Don't* use a tourniquet or try to "cut and suck" the wound—both techniques can cause more harm than the venom, including infection or gangrene. Also, *don't* pack the wound in ice or give the victim alcohol. 2. Rattlers are pit vipers with a powerful body, thin neck and well-defined triangular head with hooded eyes. They don't see well but rather are heat sensors—they will know from the amount of heat your body gives off that you aren't "lunch" and might hurt them. If they have an escape route, they will take it and will strike only if they are startled, trapped or very young.

wasp, hornet and bee stings

Don't leave food, drinks or garbage out and uncovered. Avoid wearing perfumes and bright floral-patterned clothes. *Don't* walk barefoot ("Oh, Mom!") and *don't* plant star jasmine or bottlebrush near decks or pools.

Wash the wound site to prevent infection, scrape or flick out stinger with something like a credit card if it is still present (pulling the stinger out may release more venom). Watch for allergic reactions and seek medical help if any appear.

1. Stings cause more deaths than bites from spiders, usually because of allergic reactions. 2. Only honey bees leave a stinger in the wound—others can sting repeatedly. Africanized bees, which are not more lethal but more aggressive and can sting hundreds of times, have been found only as far north as Los Angeles.

excessive sun exposure

Wear a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 on a daily basis, year round. Limit recreation outdoors between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., when the sun's rays are at their strongest. Wear protective clothing in the sun, including a broad-brimmed hat and clothing to wrist and ankles. Reapply sunscreen every two hours while outdoors, particularly after swimming.

Treatment, as recommended by dermatologists, consists of taking aspirin immediately and treating the burn topically with aloe vera gel. In the case of more severe burns or infection, seek medical attention.

1. Be aware that sunscreen is not recommended for infants under six months of age—babies should be kept out of the sun or protected by clothing instead. 2. The SPF in sunscreen means that the lotion multiplies your safety in the sun by that amount. For example, a fair-skinned person would be safe in the sun unprotected for one minute but could endure it for 15 minutes with an SPF of 15. A dark-skinned person, who might be safe in the sun unprotected for 20 minutes, is protected for five hours at SPF 15.

food poisoning

Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Food that reaches room temperature for two or more hours is possibly spoiled and anyone who eats it (including pets) can get food poisoning. Remember: *If in doubt, throw it out.* Also, cook meats thoroughly, including chicken, hamburgers and hot dogs—no pink juices.

Replace fluids to prevent dehydration; seek medical attention if more severe symptoms arise.

1. The *E. coli* bacteria—which comes from improperly cooked meats and can be deadly for young children—may not cause symptoms for as many as five days.

fun buster prevention

poison oak

Learn to recognize the plant: *Leaves of three, let it be.* Wear protective clothing and wash it immediately in hot water and laundry soap upon returning home (unwashed clothes have been found to retain toxicity for more than a year). Keep animals, gardening tools or balls from contact with poison oak—all can retain the oily residue and give poison oak to people who touch them.

symptoms

Symptoms develop within 24–48 hours after primary or secondary contact and include redness, blistering, swelling and severe itching. Cases are most severe five days after exposure and usually last from 10 days to several weeks.

treatment

Treatment consists of over-the-counter antihistamines and hydrocortisone creams. (Be wary of overusing these medications, however, especially on small children, for whom oral and topical drugs may be too powerful a combination.) Severe cases can be treated by physicians with stronger steroids.

important things to know

1. Scratching other parts of the body with contaminated fingernails can spread poison oak. 2. A person who is infected but has washed thoroughly, cleaned his nails and changed into clean clothes cannot spread poison oak.
3. It is estimated that 50–85 percent of the population is allergic to poison oak, resulting in more severe reactions when exposed. In general, fair-skinned people with allergies are more susceptible.
4. Washing off the residue even 30 minutes after exposure is usually too late.

black widow spider bites

The black widow prefers to be left alone and often lives in dark spaces in the garage, under the eaves or in a woodpile. When working around these areas, never place your hand somewhere before checking it out first—spiders will bite in defense. If you do find a spider, the Poison Control Center says to “smack it” and discourages pesticide spraying because spiders walk on the tips of their feet and do not get enough of the poison to kill them. Overspraying increases the toxicity of your home environment without affecting the black widow.

Symptoms appear within 30–90 minutes of the bite and include headache, sweating and severe muscle tightness in large muscle groups, such as the abdomen, thighs, back and shoulders.

Call Poison Control (800-876-4766) for advice if you are bitten for help in determining if venom was actually injected, wash the wound with soap and water, seek medical treatment (if advised to) for relief of muscle pain, usually in the form of muscle relaxants.

water hazards

Swim in designated areas in oceans, lakes and rivers—look for clear water with little or no current and check the depth before swimming or diving. Enclose your pool with four-sided fencing at least five feet high with self-closing and self-latching gates and have the following rescue equipment: shepherd's crook, life ring, solid pole or rope, telephone and emergency numbers poolside, pool or door alarms if young children are present. Always wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket in open water, but don't rely solely on a life vest or swimming lessons to protect your child. *Never* allow young children to swim alone or leave them unattended near water—each year more than 1,000 children ages 14 and under drown, and small children can drown in as little as an inch of water.

Water accidents can include head injuries from diving in shallow water or ingesting water in a drowning or near-drowning episode.

Treatment includes basic rescue and resuscitation techniques—call 911 immediately if injury is severe or victim is not breathing.

1. Be wary of pool chemicals—Poison Control gets hundreds of calls each summer from people who have opened up powder or concentrated liquid forms of chlorine on a windy day and developed coughing and other serious respiratory distress. Moisture from eyes and mouth can mix with the chlorine to form hydrochloric acid, which burns. Be careful, too, in leaving these household chemicals where children or pets could get into them. If you are exposed, get fresh air, take a steamy shower, drink ice water or eat ice cream. If symptoms are severe or a child has ingested the chemical, seek emergency medical treatment immediately.