

Heat Illness at the Track

By Frank Osborn, M.D., NER/PCA Member

We spend a lot of time and effort preparing our cars for the track. The more experience we gain, the more we realize that one of the most important components on the track is actually the driver. With this in mind, we need to prepare ourselves for the track and keep ourselves in the best condition while there.

Heat illness in various forms is the biggest problem we face during our time at the track with several environmental factors at work:

- Higher humidity and ambient temperatures of most track days;
- Cars equaling metal boxes out in the sun with minimal ventilation (doors closed);
- Long clothing and a helmet that keep us warmer than normal;
- Lack of air conditioning in many track cars;
- Adrenaline caused by excitement, concentration, and working hard; and
- Other factors of our own doing — being out of shape, being overweight, and getting sunburned.

There are four processes by which the body rids itself of excess heat:

- Conduction (occurs when the body comes in contact with something cold, allowing heat to be transferred to the cooler object, such as when one applies cold packs to the body);
- Convection (when air passes over the body, lifting heat away, as occurs on a windy day or through the use of fans);
- Radiation (infrared dissipation, or heat released by the body into the environment); and
- Evaporation (evaporation of sweat from the skin plays a major role in heat dissipation during exercise and is the primary thermo-regulatory mechanism when the ambient temperature is above 20°C/68°F).

Signs of heat illness:

- Early signs include: thirst, muscle cramps, sweating, and rapid heart rate;
- More serious signs include: headache, muscle pain, extreme fatigue, nausea and vomiting, decreased urination, confusion, irritability, dizziness or passing out.

Prevention:

- 600-800 ml/hr (20-24 oz/hr or 2-3 cups/hr) of fluid intake including water or a sports drink;
- Avoid soda, juices and other caffeinated beverages;
- Drink when you are thirsty;
- Drink enough to produce lightly colored urine;
- Wear sunscreen;
- Lose weight, stay in shape;
- Rest in the shade/cool environment in between track sessions; and
- Keep an eye on your fellow participants;

Treatment:

- Ice packs/cool cloths on back of neck, armpits, groin, and various other pulse points;
- Remove clothing layers (change to shorts, short sleeve shirts, sandals);
- Increase fluid intake;
- Get into cool shade or air conditioning;
- Skip a session of driving;
- Let friends or other club members know you don't feel good; and most importantly,
- If you are feeling worse, no better, or feel something is very wrong, seek medical care immediately.

Frank is Board Certified in Family Medicine and is in a private practice in Tewksbury, MA.