



# Preventing Heat Illness Must Be No. 1 Priority

BY ROBERT B. GARDNER, NFHS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AND KEVIN CHARLES, NFHS PRESIDENT

As we close the book on the first four months of 2013 and look ahead to May, people in many areas around the country are wondering when it will warm up and when it will stop raining. Some states, in fact, still had snow-covered fields in late April and had not been able to hold a single outdoor practice for spring sports.

Rest assured, however, the rain will stop and the heat will come; and by the time the heat intensifies in July and August, school leaders – administrators, coaches, athletic directors and athletic trainers – must have effective prevention plans in place to ensure that student-athletes are fully protected from heat-related illnesses and injuries.

With many schools on a year-round calendar, practice sessions for fall sports have been pushed back to late July in some cases. It is dreadfully hot and humid in many parts of the country at this time, and the results have not been good in recent years.

The National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research reported that 41 high school football players have died from exertional heatstroke (EHS) since 1995. In addition, there have been countless “near-misses” with emergency room visits and hospitalizations.

Yes, we’ve had some extremely hot summers in recent years, but the aforementioned numbers are troubling. While there are more than a million young people who play high school football each year, NONE of these individuals should die from exertional heatstroke. In fact, EHS is the leading cause of preventable death in high school athletics.

The NFHS, through its Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (SMAC) and Coach Education Program, offers many educational tools to assist schools in developing a proper heat acclimatization and heat illness prevention program. In addition, many state associations have developed guidelines for dealing with heat issues and safety challenges.

The SMAC has developed a “Heat Acclimatization and Heat Illness Prevention Position Statement” which is available in PDF format on the NFHS Web site ([www.nfhs.org](http://www.nfhs.org)). This document contains seven fundamentals of a Heat Acclimatization Program. In addition, the SMAC’s “Position Statement and Recommendations for Hydration to Minimize the Risk for Dehydration and Heat Illness” is also on the site.

Most recently, the NFHS has created a free online course entitled “A Guide to Heat Acclimatization and Heat Illness Prevention.” This course, which is available at [www.nfhslearn.com](http://www.nfhslearn.com), also reviews the seven fundamentals of a Heat Acclimatization Program. In addition, a more in-depth seven-page section on heat-related illness is contained in the fourth edition of the NFHS Sports Medicine Handbook, which can be ordered online at [www.nfhs.com](http://www.nfhs.com).

Among the fundamentals of a Heat Acclimatization Program are 1) a slow progression in activity level – duration and intensity; 2) adjusting workouts as heat and humidity increase, including close monitoring and a prompt response to developing problems; and 3) proper hydration.

While coaches only have a prescribed number of practices before that first contest in all fall sports, the rush to have the team in prime shape for the first game cannot come at the expense of the players’ health. The varying physical conditions of players must be considered, and special attention should be directed to higher-risk students.

If it still exists anywhere in this country – and hopefully it does not – the old-school mentality of “run ‘em till they drop” must be eliminated from high school sports. In extreme heat and humidity, this philosophy will not have a good ending.

In those cases of extreme heat and humidity, practice sessions MUST be adjusted. And, be aware that less-than-extreme conditions pose a risk as well. Heroes are those who adjust their plan accordingly to effectively and sufficiently reduce the risk of exertional heat illness, not those who “tough it out” no matter the elements.

Some states have definitive criteria for when practices should be altered or canceled. The following link to the NOAA’s heat index chart is an excellent resource for determining when the heat index reaches the danger zone: <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/heat/index.shtml>.

While there is an abundant amount of educational material available, deaths from EHS will not be eliminated unless school leaders make this a No. 1 priority. We strongly encourage you to require every coach in your school to take the free online course – *A Guide to Heat Acclimatization and Heat Illness Prevention* – at [www.nfhslearn.com](http://www.nfhslearn.com). It could be the best investment of time they will spend this year. ●