

INFORMATION YOU SHOULD KNOW

AVOIDING HEAT RELATED INJURIES

Heat is the number one weather related killer in the United States. High summer temperatures increase the risk of death or injury. More than 50% of heat related injuries result in death. These tragic incidents are preventable.

According to the National Weather Service, the severity of heat disorders tends to increase with age. Conditions that cause heat cramps in a 17-year-old may result in heat exhaustion in a 40-year-old and heat stroke in a person over the age of 60. While heat and humidity put all people at risk for injury: the very young, and individuals with chronic illnesses are especially vulnerable.

When left in a vehicle on a hot day, even for a short period of time, an individual is at great risk for injury or death. More than half of heat related deaths occur when a person is left unattended in a vehicle. This kind of neglect has serious consequences, and can lead to a criminal prosecution of the direct support staff involved.

CASE SCENARIO #1

The residents and staff of a community home are preparing for a group outing. In anticipation of the day's activities, an individual boarded the group home's van early to make sure he reserved his favorite seat. As everyone leaves the house, the staff realizes that the number of passengers exceeds the seating capacity of the van, and decides to take two passenger cars instead. On the way to the outing, one of the staff members in the first car realizes that a consumer is missing and assumes that he is riding in the second vehicle. When they reach their destination, the staff member realizes that the missing consumer had not, in fact, been in the second vehicle, and is nowhere in sight. After consulting with her fellow staff members, they collectively decide that the consumer must have decided to stay home, yet they do not call the residence in order to confirm this assumption. Three hours later the consumer is found in the van, unconscious, at which time the temperature on this early summer day has reached a sweltering high of 90 degrees. Although EMS was called and the consumer was immediately transported to the local hospital, the damage was irreparable. He suffered from heat stroke and spent several weeks in the hospital. Two years later, the individual continues to have lingering effects from this incident.

CASE SCENARIO #2

Each day, a staff member picks up consumers from various group homes in the community and brings them to their day treatment program. One of the staff member's job responsibilities is to "sweep" the van to make sure that it is always left unoccupied after it arrives at the day treatment facility. On the day in question, instead of doing a thorough sweep, the staff member simply watches while the consumers exit the van. When the last consumer appears to have stepped out of the van, she visually scans the interior of the van from the front, locks the van doors, and assists the consumers to their respective treatment areas. At the end of the day, the staff member makes a return trip, bringing each consumer back home. After having finished work that day, while eating dinner at her own home, a call is placed to the staff member indicating that one consumer had not returned home that day. It was at that point that the staff member returned to the van and did a complete search, where she found the missing consumer slumped over in the van's rear seat. The consumer had spent eight hours in the van in 85 degree heat, and would be pronounced dead later that evening after being transported to the hospital.

Each year, an unknown number of young children and adults with disabilities suffer significant injuries (including death) from being enclosed in parked motor vehicles; the majority of which occur during the summer months. These incidents can be directly attributed to a lack of supervision on the part of direct care staff and a lack of clear policies and procedures defined by the agency.

Children and adults with disabilities can suffer from heat stroke within minutes, which can be followed by a permanent disability and death. Heat stroke can occur when the body temperature reaches 105 degrees Fahrenheit. Death can occur at a slightly higher body temperature of 107 degrees Fahrenheit.



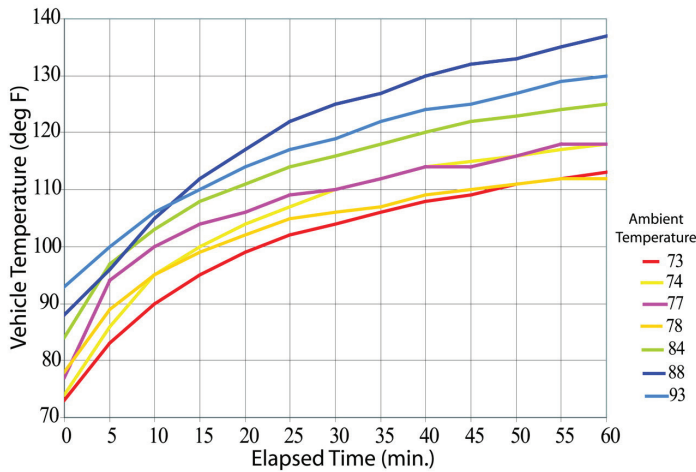
VEHICLE SAFETY: AVOIDING HEAT RELATED INJURIES

WHAT HAPPENS IF A PERSON'S BODY GETS TOO HOT?

- Body temperature rises quickly because the person cannot sweat enough to lower his/her temperature
- High body temperatures cause damage to the brain and other vital organs
- This damage leads to permanent motor, sensory and cognitive impairment, or death

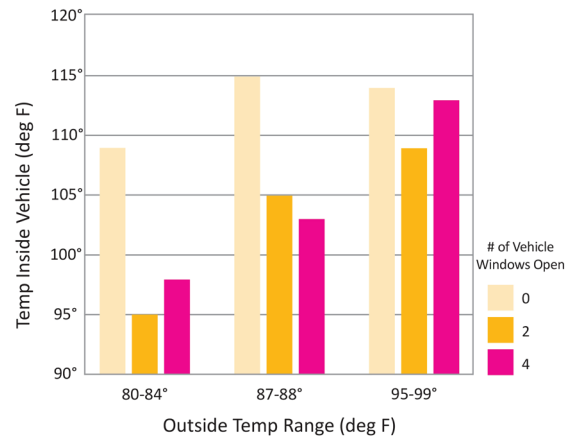
On a hot day, a vehicle acts as a greenhouse. It retains hot air causing the temperature to rise within minutes. On an 80 degree day, it takes a mere 10 minutes for the temperature to rise to 100 degrees. Opening the window or parking in the shade will not prevent a heat disorder from developing. The vehicle will still reach a temperature the body cannot tolerate. Vehicle temperatures can rise as much as 30 degrees in just 20 minutes.

REPRESENTATIVE VEHICLE TEMPERATURE RISE OVER TIME



Source: American Academy of Pediatrics

VEHICLE TEMPERATURE
Windows Open vs. Closed



Most heat related injuries that involve leaving someone unattended in a vehicle are due to a general lack of awareness and understanding of how rapidly the temperature can rise inside a vehicle. Most children and adults with a developmental disability do not realize what is happening to them and, as a result, become disoriented very quickly. In many cases, due to cognitive and/or physical limitations, these individuals are unable to get themselves out of the vehicle and essentially became trapped inside.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Agencies must become more aware and vigilant when it comes to the risks posed by heat related danger. They need to increase their knowledge and awareness while setting relevant policies to prevent heat related injuries and death. More importantly, they must ensure that no consumer is left alone in any vehicle for any reason, even if it is only for a few minutes. Policies that address vehicle and heat safety should include:

- Written procedures that state individuals are not to be left alone in a vehicle for any reason
- Protocols that ensure staff check the vehicle to make sure everyone has exited

Put signs in the vehicle that reminds people of the following:

- No one is to be left alone in the vehicle
- Check the vehicle at every stop to ensure that no one is left behind

Direct support staff should NEVER leave an individual in a vehicle unattended. Educate all employees on the risk of injury or death from leaving an individual unattended in a vehicle, and that such an incident can result in criminal charges.

The health and safety of the people you support is everyone's responsibility.

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