FACT SHEET

U.S. ARMY PUBLIC HEALTH CENTER

FS No. 12-005-0621

HEAT ILLNESS

What is Exertional Heat Illness?

Heat Illness associated with physical exertion is known as exertional heat illness (EHI). EHI is a spectrum of disorders to include dehydration, mild heat cramps, heat exhaustion (when the cardiovascular system cannot maintain the high blood flow required for both movement and sweating), and heat stroke.[1-4] Hyponatremia, or exertional hyponatremia, occurs when excessive water consumption causes an imbalance to the body chemistry.[1-2] **Table 1** summarizes these conditions.

Why is Heat Illness a concern to the Army?

Despite well documented effective techniques to prevent EHIs, they continue to be a threat to Soldiers in training and combat. On average, 2-3 Soldiers die annually from EHI, and more than 1,000 Soldiers develop an EHI requiring medical attention and/or lost duty time.[3] Even mild heat illness can significantly degrade performance. As a result, Army policy mandates all personnel receive annual heat illness prevention training before May, and all heat stroke and heat exhaustion cases are reported.[1-3,A]

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What causes EHI and how can it be prevented?

EHIs are caused by a combination of external conditions and individual risk factors. Key external factors include **H**eat category within the past 3 days, **E**xertion level, **A**cclimation, and **T**ime of exposure and rest period (**HEAT**).

✚ *Heat category*

Most EHIs occur between May and September, especially above 75°F.[1-7] However, military cases of EHI (including stroke) *occur year-round*, even in cooler temperatures.[4] In addition to the basic temperature, it is important to consider the amount of sunlight, humidity, and wind speed. The Wet Bulb Globe Temperature (WBGT) index combines these into one value. WBGT Risk Categories **(Table 2)** must be used to determine activity levels.[1,2] ***Prevention:*** *Avoid Risk Categories 4 and 5, especially repeated days; conduct activities at night/ before sun up, in shade.*[A,B]

✚ *Lack of acclimation*

Higher rates of EHI are seen among trainees, especially recruits from northern locations.[5,6] This is often due to incomplete acclimation, when personnel are not used to sudden climate changes or increased frequency and duration of strenuous activities.[6,7] ***Prevention:*** *Gradually increase exposure (e.g., 2 weeks or more) to warm climates and higher exertion in warm climates; increase rest periods during high exertion.*[C]

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✚ *Exertion (duration, frequency, intensity)*

Strenuous physical training, sports, or job tasks increase EHI risk especially if activities extend over long time periods (e.g., >60-90 minutes),[8] are repeated over days, and/or persons must wear protective equipment or carry heavy loads. Physically intense military activities such as Basic Combat Training, field training exercises, and road marches over 8 kilometers are examples of high risk activities. ***Prevention***: *Add 5°F to the WBGT for ruck sack/body armor and 10°F for full chemical protective gear to capture actual risk level; minimize activity duration, frequency, level of exertion, and/or gear to reduce risk.*[1-4]

✚ *Dehydration*

Even in moderate weather conditions, heavy exertion causes fluid loss, which can result in dehydration if not replaced. This increases EHI risk and can result in sub-optimal performance.[9] While 2% loss of body weight from dehydration has been suggested as a threshold for reduced aerobic performance, a specific percent cannot be used to assess likelihood of EHI due to individual variability and other risk factors.[7,9] ***Prevention***: *Monitor hydration status during field training; follow Work/Rest and Water Consumption guidance **(Table 3)**, not to exceed 1 qt/hr, or 1.5 qt/hr when doing intense physical activity; track water consumption using knots or black beads on outer garment (1 per canteen/ liter consumed). Also, first morning urine color charts are good tools to assess adequate day-to-day fluid intake.*[1,2,A,B]

U.S. Army, APHC Photo by Graham Snodgrass

✚ *Personal risk factors*

The following characteristics and behaviors are associated with a higher risk of developing EHI:

- **Previously having had an EHI** [1,2]
- **Not being adequately fit** (e.g., slow 2-mile run times or weight not within Army standards)
- **Currently being ill** (e.g., having fever, diarrhea, or flu)
- **Being especially highly motivated** (e.g., persons who push themselves harder may ignore early EHI signs or symptoms)
- **Recently using alcohol or certain drugs** (e.g., antihistamines, blood pressure medications, decongestants, antidepressants, and some diuretics)
- **Representing an at-risk demographic group** (e.g., the typical Army heat casualty is a Caucasian male <30,[5,6] but data suggests persons >40 years have higher risk of EHI; men have higher risk of heat stroke, while women have higher risk of mild EHI, including heat exhaustion[5,10]

NOTE: typical consumption of caffeinated drinks has not been shown to lead to fluid loss or dehydration.[9]

Prevention: *Be aware of high risk persons; identify and mark persons with prior EHI (e.g., use red beads); use buddy system to monitor signs, symptoms, and hydration status.*[1]

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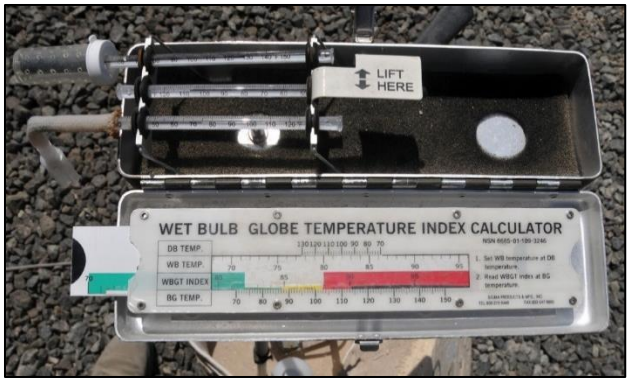
Table 1. Heat Casualties: Signs, Symptoms, Actions[1, 10, 11]

Heat cramps: *a first sign to catch*	
• Muscle pain or spasms (abdomen, arms, legs)	• Stop activity, move to shade • Drink juice/water with 1/2 pack salt or sports drink
Heat Exhaustion: *catch signs early and treat*	
• Dizziness • Headache • Nausea • Weakness • Clumsy/unsteady walk • Muscle cramps	• Rest in shade • Loosen uniform/remove head gear • Ensure excess water has not been consumed, limit to 2 quarts over 1-hour period • Evacuate if no improvement in 30 min, or if condition worsens
Heat Stroke: *a medical emergency*	
• Convulsions and chills • Vomiting • Confusion, mumbling • Possibly combative • Passing out (unconscious)	**COOL and CALL (ASAP)!** • Strip clothing • Rapid cool (ice sheets) • Call for ER evacuation • Continue cooling during transport • Keep same person to observe for mental change during transport
Hyponatremia: *a medical emergency*	
• History of large water consumption • Confusion • Vomiting (liquid, no food)/ repeat vomiting • Clear urine • Convulsions	Water intoxication (overconsumption of water) requires medical treatment ASAP!
When in doubt – call 911 for emergency evacuation!	

Table 2. Wet Bulb Globe Temperature Risk Categories

Category	WBGT, °F	WBGT, °C	Flag Color
1	< 82	< 27.8	White
2	82 - 84.9	27.8-29.3	Green
3	85 - 87.9	29.4 - 31.0	Yellow
4	88 - 89.9	31.1 - 32.1	Red
5	≥90	≥ 32.2	Black



DVIDS-1333913, U.S. Army Photo by Sgt. Eric Peterson

Table 3. Work/Rest Times and Fluid Replacement Guide

Applies to average size, heat-acclimated Soldier wearing army combat uniform, hot weather. https://ephc.amedd.army.mil/HIPECatalog/viewItem.aspx?id=705

Heat Category	WBGT Index (°F)	Easy Work: Walking on hard surface, 2.5 mph, <30 lb. load; weapon maintenance, marksmanship training.		Moderate Work: Patrolling, walking in sand, 2.5 mph, no load; calisthenics.		Hard Work: Walking in sand, 2.5 mph, with load; field assaults.	
		Work/Rest (minutes)	*Fluid Intake (quarts/hour)*	*Work/Rest (minutes)*	*Fluid Intake (quarts/hour)*	*Work/Rest (minutes)*	*Fluid Intake (quarts/hour)*
1	78° - 81.9°	NL	½	NL	¾	40/20 (70)*	¾ (1)*
2 (GREEN)	82° - 84.9°	NL	½	50/10 (150)*	¾ (1)*	30/30 (65)*	1 (1¼)*
3 (YELLOW)	85° - 87.9°	NL	¾	40/20 (100)*	¾ (1)*	30/30 (55)*	1 (1¼)*
4 (RED)	88° - 89.9°	NL	¾	30/30 (80)*	¾ (1¼)*	20/40 (50)*	1 (1¼)*
5 (BLACK)	> 90°	50/10 (180)*	1	20/40 (70)*	1 (1¼)*	10/50 (45)*	1 (1½)*

NL = No limit to work time per hour.

*Use the amounts in parentheses for continuous work when rest breaks are not possible. Leaders should ensure several hours of rest and rehydration time after continuous work.

This guidance will sustain performance and hydration for at least 4 hours of work in the specified heat category. Fluid needs can vary based on individual differences (± ¼ qt/hr) and exposure to full sun or full shade (± ¼ qt/hr).

Rest means minimal physical activity (sitting or standing) in the shade if possible.

Body Armor - Add 5°F to WBGT index in humid climates.

NBC (MOPP 4) - Add 10°F (Easy Work) or 20°F (Moderate or Hard Work) to WBGT Index.

CAUTION: Hourly fluid intake should not exceed 1½ qts. Daily fluid intake should not exceed 12 qts.

References:

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9. Kenefick RW and Cheuvront SN. 2012. Hydration for recreational sport and physical activity, *Nutr Rev* 70(Supp 2):S137-42.
10. Berko J, et al. 2014. Deaths attributed to heat, cold, and other weather events in US, 2006-2010. *Natl Health Stat Report* 76:1-15.

More: [A] APHC Heat Illness Prevention webpage: https://phc.amedd.army.mil/topics/discond/hipss/Pages/default.aspx
[B] APHC e-Catalog Heat Injury Products (cards, posters): https://usaphcapps.amedd.army.mil/HIOShoppingCart/searchResults.aspx?hotlist=8
[C] Dept. of Army (USARIEM) Acclimatization guidance: http://www.usariem.army.mil/assets/docs/partnering/HeatAcclimatizationGuide.pdf
[D] Medical Aspects of Harsh Environments, Volume 1 (2001): https://www.medcoe.army.mil/borden-tb-med-aspects-harsh-environ-vol1