

Heat sickness must be taken seriously, Catholic hospital experts warn

By Maria Wiering

mwiering@CatholicReview.org

As Maryland endures a heat wave, Dr. Michael Zimring has three words of advice: "Water, water, water."

The director of travel medicine at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, Zimring said hydration is the best way to cope with oppressive heat.

Since June 27, daytime highs in Baltimore City have exceeded 90 degrees, including several 100-degree and hotter days.

The Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene issued a heat advisory July 5 for much of the state through July 8.

A June 30 storm caused widespread power outages, compounding the heat-related health risks in the area as thousands of people lack regular access to air conditioning.

Drinking plenty of liquids is central to avoiding dehydration during these hot days, but beer and wine are not replacements for water, Zimring said.

"Alcohol is a dehydrator," he said. "You're going to drink beer out there, fine. But you aren't going to keep cool. You need hydration, because you will lose a lot in sweat, and (not staying hydrated is) going to make you sick."

He also advised people who are outdoors to wear a hat and avoid outdoor work between the hottest hours of 10 or 11 a.m. and 1 or 2 p.m.

Those without air conditioning can also escape the heat at public places such as malls, libraries and designated cooling centers, said Zimring, who was without power at his Ellicott City home for five days following the June 30 storm.

A list of cooling centers is available at the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's website, www.dhmh.maryland.gov.

For those without air conditioning, Zimring recommends using a mister and fan, which causes evaporation, keeping one's body cool.

Dr. Teresa Muns, assistant director of emergency medicine at MedStar Good Samaritan Hospital in Baltimore, cautioned against relying on a fan without a mister.

"Electric fans may provide comfort, but when the temperature is in the high 90s or hotter, fans will not prevent heat-related illness" like heat stroke and heat exhaustion, she told the Catholic Review via email.

Heat stroke symptoms include a 103-degree or higher body temperature; red, hot and dry skin with no sweating; a rapid, strong pulse; a throbbing headache; dizziness; nausea; confusion; and unconsciousness, she said.

If someone discovers a person suffering from heat stroke, he or she should call 911, get the person to a shady area and spray the victim with cool water or wrap him or her in a wet sheet, while fanning "vigorously" until help arrives, Muns said.

Do not give a person with heat stroke fluids to drink, she said.

Some medications, including those for allergy, blood pressure and weight reduction, can also cause heatstroke, she said.

Heat exhaustion is also dangerous, and includes symptoms such as weakness, dizziness or worry, and dehydration. Muns recommends people with these signs seek shade or air conditioning to cool down.

A cool shower or sponge bath may also help, she said.

During the heat wave, Muns advises people reduce exercise, or drink two to four glasses of cool, non-alcoholic fluids each hour if exercising.

In a statement responding to the heat advisory, Governor Martin J. O'Malley urged Marylanders to check on heat-vulnerable family members, friends and neighbors.

"Even residents in good health can become a victim of heat exhaustion. Whenever possible, avoid spending prolonged time outdoors, stay hydrated and remember to keep in touch with those who may need assistance," he said.

The governor's statement also recommended that people stay hydrated; wear loose-fitting, lightweight and light-colored clothing; and never leave young children or pets in car, even with windows cracked.

St. Agnes Hospital in Catonsville reiterated that last point with a July 5 tweet: "Remember that when it is 100 degrees outside, a car sitting in the sun can reach temperatures of 200 degrees or more. Never leave pets and children home, even for a few moments," it said.

Parishes are also still recovering from the severe storm, which struck after several days of high temperatures and knocked out power for nearly 700,000 Baltimore Gas and Electric customers.

Mary Newheimer, parish secretary of St. Pius X, Rodgers Forge, said July 5 that the parish has electricity but no air conditioning or Internet, which were affected by the electrical issues.

BGE has "been working on it continuously," Newheimer said, but doesn't know when either will be restored. The energy provider had restored power to nearly 670,000 customers by July 5.

Elizabeth Lowe contributed to this story.