

The Long Summer

By Heather Stergos



For most of us summer is a time to look forward to. It is a time of vacations, cookouts with family and friends, lazy afternoons on the front porch with a cold drink and a multitude of fun outdoor activities that we all look forward to. There are annoyances that come with these fun-filled summer days, such as mosquitos, sunburn from long hours at the pool and the increased electric bill due to the ever-running air conditioning, but for the most part, summer is a time of relaxation and fun. This is not the reality for those who are homeless. Though it may be easy to recognize the risks and struggles the homeless face in the cold of winter, the risks and difficulties they face in the summer months may not be as widely recognized, but they can be equally as deadly.

Those who are homeless do not have the options for cooling off that most of us enjoy. During the day as the temperature rises they cannot turn up the air conditioner or jump into a backyard pool. There is no opportunity to escape the heat of the day. This typically means that the homeless individual is exposed to the heat 24 hours a day without a break and often this means they are exposed to direct sun from morning until night, heating the body without giving it the opportunity to cool down. This increases their risk for hyperthermia and heat stroke and on days when the temperature reaches 95 degrees or higher, this can be deadly. Most restaurants and stores have “customer only” policies that prevent the homeless from coming in to get out of the heat. Often, libraries and public fountains, especially on days when there is a heat alert, are the only options the homeless have to find refuge from the heat. There are things that can be done to help the homeless survive the often-deadly heat of summer. Donations of bottled water, personal fans, sun visors, hats and sunscreen to local programs that work with the homeless can be enormously beneficial in helping these individuals make it safely through the summer months.

Another issue summer brings to the homeless is an increase in foot problems. Those who do not have a place to live often spend much of their day, and often the night, walking and many times they do so in shoes that either

do not fit correctly or are older and have holes or worn soles and typically without socks or clean socks. This can put much pressure on the feet generally, but in the summer months, foot issues take on a more dangerous quality. Excessive walking in the heat leads to feet that are hot and sweaty and this can lead to severe infections such as athlete's foot, blisters that become infected, ingrown toenails and more, all of which can have serious implications to those for whom much walking is necessary for survival. Donations to local programs of shoes, socks and medicated foot powder during the summer months can help reduce the risks of foot injuries and infections.

Most of us experience the annoyance of mosquitos in the summer months, and typically are able to go inside, use bug spray or find other options to keep the pesky critters at bay. These are options that the homeless often do not have, and with the increase in mosquitos that the summer brings, as well as increased numbers of ticks and other insects, insect bites can be a very problematic issue for the homeless population. Many times, sleeping in a wooded area or in a park are the only options available to the homeless, putting them right in the thick of the problem. Without the protection of insect repellent, the homeless can end up with numerous bites, increasing the risk of infection and the spread of disease, not to mention skin infections from the incessant itching that accompanies these bites. Again, donations of insect repellent, calamine lotion and other first aid supplies for summertime insects can be lifesaving.

There is no question that summer can be a dangerous time for those who are homeless. If you have a desire to get involved, donating to your local homeless program and giving a homeless person a bottle of water on a hot day are simple ways that we can all help the homeless make it through the risky summertime months.

Reference

ThriveD.C. (2017). Five ways summertime is dangerous for the homeless. Retrieved from:
<https://www.thrivedc.org/top-five-ways-the-summer-is-dangerous-for-the-homeless/>