

CATHARINE RICHERT: The 4th of July may be over, but summer is just getting started. And for emergency rooms, this is one of the busiest times of the year. From firework injuries to boating accidents to dehydration, bike crashes, the heat brings emergency physicians a predictable wave of injuries that are often preventable. Dr. Jim Miner is the Chair of Emergency Medicine at the University of Minnesota. He joins us now with some reminders on how to stay safe this summer. Welcome, Dr. Miner.

JIM MINER: Thank you.

CATHARINE RICHERT: All right, so what kind of injuries do you see most often at this point of the summer, right around the July 4th weekend?

JIM MINER: Well, predictably, everybody's out and doing fun stuff, and that can lead to injuries. So we see a lot more falls, a lot more rollerblade accidents, bike accidents. You name it, everyone's out doing their favorite thing, and that can put you at a higher risk for an injury.

CATHARINE RICHERT: You know, we've had this really long stretch now of hot weather. There is more to come. What are some of the biggest health risks that can come along with the heat that people may not be thinking about as they're having fun that would actually land them in the emergency room?

JIM MINER: Well, that's a great question, because one of the problems we face in Minnesota is, luckily, it's not hot here very often. So when it gets hot, none of us are used to it.

CATHARINE RICHERT: [LAUGHS] Right.

JIM MINER: So it's a big change for everybody. It was kind of cold three weeks ago. [LAUGHS]

CATHARINE RICHERT: Yeah.

JIM MINER: Relative-- if you were swimming, it wasn't a hot day, you know? And now all of the sudden, it's really, really warm, warmer than you're used to. So we can see people playing soccer on TV where it's 90 degrees and they're just fine, but we don't live that every day. So when you get into temperatures you're not used to being in every day, you have to adjust. And it takes weeks for your body to adjust. So what we need to do is make sure we're drinking tons of fluids, keeping cool, and just kind of backing off on some of our harder physical activities.

CATHARINE RICHERT: Yeah, it feels like drinking water is always the right thing to do, especially when it's hot out. But what are some of the warning signs that someone might be experiencing a serious episode like heat exhaustion or heat stroke? When should someone call the emergency room, or go to the emergency room?

JIM MINER: Well, heat exhaustion is just when you're too hot. So you're exercising. You're out in the heat. And its name kind of speaks for itself. You just start to feel sick. You don't feel well. Sometimes it's nauseous. Sometimes it's tired, dizzy. Those are symptoms, when you're out in the heat, that are almost certainly from the heat, and a great sign that you need to get somewhere cooler, in the air conditioning, into the shade, and start drinking a lot more fluids.

The other signs you can look for is when you're going to the bathroom. When you urinate, your urine will get darker and darker as you get dehydrated, or you won't go at all. So if you haven't gone for a while or it's getting really dark, you're dehydrated, and it's from being out in the warm weather.

Other things you can look for is sweating's very normal when it's hot. And actually, the more you sweat, it probably means your body is more adapted to the heat if you're a real sweaty person. But when you start sweating less and still feel hot, that's a sign that you're getting dehydrated and you need to get out of the heat.

CATHARINE RICHERT: All right. So a lot of people also spend a lot of time on the water, maybe at the lake, the pool. On 4th of July weekend, there were three drownings across the state. What are your biggest safety reminders for people who are swimming or boating or just enjoying those lakes and rivers?

JIM MINER: Well, it's really important, because water is a lot of fun, and it's a big part for all of us in Minnesota, but it's always dangerous. Most important thing is if you have children, they need to have somebody observing them all the time. Until a person is completely comfortable swimming without any assistance, they need an eye on them when they're in the water.

A lot of things can happen, but kids don't know that they can't swim, and might put themselves in a position where they get tired and sink. And once you're underwater, you can't call for help. So it's really important to keep an eye on kids or keep a life jacket in the water. If you're not sure, just keep a life jacket on. They've got lots of great colors and stuff now. You don't even have to look-- you don't have to have the bright orange thing. You can find something a lot more fun to wear all day.

CATHARINE RICHERT: A lot cooler. [LAUGHS]

JIM MINER: But it keeps the sun off-- keeps the sun off your child and it keeps them from drowning. So it's something to think about if you're not 100% sure you can keep direct visualization on the kid all the time, but you really need to keep a close eye on them.

CATHARINE RICHERT: Now, what about biking--

JIM MINER: For adults--

CATHARINE RICHERT: Go ahead.

JIM MINER: Oh, sorry. For adults in the water, it's really important, if you don't know how to swim, to consider the same thing, because it can happen really fast. You think you're just going to dive in, and you all of the sudden realize it's deeper than you thought. And you don't know how to swim, and you can go down very quickly. Get a life jacket on.

And finally, if you're drinking near the water, it becomes way more dangerous, and it's something to think really carefully about. I don't recommend getting in the water if you've been drinking alcohol.

CATHARINE RICHERT: All right. People are also spending a lot more time hiking and biking. What about the woodsier activities? What are your biggest concerns there?

JIM MINER: Well, a couple things. First, bring water with you when it's hot, because it can catch up to you very quickly, especially if you're biking or hiking. Also, bring a way to communicate, because if you trip and fall, if you get hurt and you're way off in the woods, getting yourself to safety, if you have no way to communicate, is really going to be a challenge. So it's just something to think about. Make sure your phone's charged, bring an extra battery if you're going for a long trip, and have some way to communicate out.

Finally, we can't forget ticks and mosquitoes, which are a big deal in Minnesota. And ticks carry some diseases that we don't want to catch. So nobody loves the smell of bug spray, but if you're in the woods and there's going to be brush coming up against you at any point, you've got a chance of getting a tick, and it's worth putting some bug repellent on.

CATHARINE RICHERT: So I'm based down in Rochester. I see them up in the cities too. We have a lot of Lime electric scooters that kids will scoot around on at night. The bikes, the e-bikes as well that you can rent. I mean, what are some of the safety concerns there? And have you seen an increase in injuries in the ER associated with these types of electric bikes and scooters?

JIM MINER: Yeah. The injuries that are on an electric bike are almost always worse than an equivalent injury on a non-electric bike, and there's a couple reasons. One, they can go a lot faster. And the other thing is to make a bike or a scooter go faster on your own power, you have to concentrate on it and pay attention to what you're doing. Whereas on an e-bike, you can go fast and not really be that engaged in what you're doing, which leads to bad accidents.

They do have a higher injury rate than regular bikes. And we do see injuries we never used to see on regular-- especially we didn't really see scooter injuries from people-powered scooters. We really have only-- I mean, occasionally we would, but really rare. And now we regularly see e-scooter injuries. So it's really something-- you don't-- it doesn't take a lot of your personal effort to make them go, but you need to be as engaged as if you were pushing or pedaling on your own.

CATHARINE RICHERT: You know, while I have you here, I do want to bring up the issue of open air drug use. Some Twin Cities residents are raising the alarms that they've seen more of this happening in their communities on sidewalks, at bus stops. Have you seen an increase in drug-related visits to the emergency room this time of year?

JIM MINER: We see, unfortunately, drugs year round. I think what we see in the summer is some of that drug abuse out where the rest of us can see it. And it's a tragic problem for every community, but we have it here in Minnesota too, that there are people who suffer from addiction and are using drugs and need help.

And they're just-- it's easier to see one another in the summer. So I think what we're witnessing is the problem we have with drugs in our community, and it's just because we're all outside in the summer.

CATHARINE RICHERT: Now, if someone were to encounter someone who appears to have taken drugs or is unconscious, what should they do?

JIM MINER: If a person appears unconscious, call 911. If you're trained in CPR and think you can help them-- usually when someone's unconscious from using drugs, it's usually from an opioid like heroin or fentanyl, and they're not breathing, and stimulating them to get them to breathe can help them. But usually, what you need is someone that has a drug called Narcan we can use to reverse it. So police officers carry that. All first responders carry it. So I would call 911 and get them help as fast as you can.

CATHARINE RICHERT: All right. If you could leave listeners with one message that will help them avoid becoming one of your patients this summer, what would it be?

JIM MINER: Well, back to the very basic for whatever ER doc could say is whatever you do, if you drink alcohol at the same time, it's a lot more dangerous. [LAUGHS] So if you're doing something that's dangerous anyway, definitely don't combine alcohol with it. That includes biking, rollerblading, swimming, wakeboarding, anything-- jet skiing. Anything you want to do, if you add alcohol to that, your chance of getting injury is going to dramatically increase. If you're going to drink, I would recommend sitting in a chair in a nice, safe place with your best friends [LAUGHS] so you can't get hurt.

CATHARINE RICHERT: Stay immobile. Stay seated is your best advice. OK. That was Dr. Jim Miner. He is Chair of Emergency Medicine at the University of Minnesota. Thanks for being with us.

JIM MINER: Thanks a lot.