

7 Ways to Deal With Heat at Soccer Practice



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When I was a young player rising through the ranks, my coaches impressed upon me the need to be aggressive, both physically and mentally. This helped me not only improve my soccer abilities but also helped me in various aspects of my life. Looking back, I believe some of my coaches were wrong on one item in particular.

I was taught that being tough meant I should mentally block out weather conditions around me, including extreme heat. I'd often hear "play through it" and "it will make you stronger" from well-meaning soccer training coaches. I now think that during extreme hot days we should have had lighter practices instead of heavier ones.

Some coaches took advantage of hot days to push their players even harder in trying to develop them. They believed that physical pain during practice meant a better player during the game. Nothing could be further from the truth. And nothing could be more dangerous as well.

Bodies have trouble cooling themselves on hot humid days. If the air is already saturated with water in the form of vapor, sweat won't evaporate as easily. Essentially, sweat has nowhere to go except remain on the skin. Therefore body sweat is a less effective cooling agent, and the body retains extra heat. Hot, humid conditions put players at risk of heat exhaustion.

Hot and humid conditions are worse for kids, not only because they're more active but also because kids have more trouble regulating their body temperature than do adults. To provide for players' safety in hot or humid conditions, take the following preventative measures when coaching youth soccer.

- Encourage players to drink plenty of water before, during, and after practice. Water makes up to 65 percent of a youth player's body weight, and losing even a small amount of water can cause severe consequences in the body's systems. It doesn't have to be hot and humid for players to become dehydrated, nor is thirst an accurate indicator. Usually by the time players are aware of their thirst they are long overdue for a drink.
- Monitor weather conditions and adjust training sessions accordingly.
- Acclimatize players to exercising in high heat and humidity. Players can adjust to high heat and humidity in 7-10 days. During the period, hold practices at low to moderate levels of activity and give the players fluid breaks every 20 minutes

- Switch to light, white-colored clothing.
- Identify and monitor players who are prone to heat illness. These include players who are overweight, muscular, out of shape, and who work very hard. Those that have experienced previous heat illness are more prone to getting heat illness as well. Keep an eye on these children and give them drink breaks every 15 minutes. For very young players, such as the U6 group, give even more breaks.
- Make sure players replace fluids lost through sweat. Encourage players to drink 2-3 hours before practices or games and every 20 minutes during and after practice. Fluids such as water and sports drinks are preferable during games and practices. For younger athletes, it's better to use water instead of sports drinks.
- Replenish electrolytes, such as sodium and potassium, which are lost through sweat. The best way to replace these nutrients in addition to others such as carbohydrate and protein is by eating a balanced diet.

We've all heard in the media about professional athletes who pushed too hard during practices that resulted in tragic consequences. These were strong, tough people. Don't make the mistake of thinking you'll make a mentally stronger team by pushing your kids through intolerable elements.