

staying healthy in the desert



The Sonoran desert is known for its hot daytime temperatures, low humidity, intense sunlight, interesting desert creatures, and unique vegetation. The staff at Campus Health would like to share a few tips for staying healthy, cool, and safe while you are here. If you have any health questions, feel free to contact us or check out our website (it has LOTS of health/medical information and many website links). <http://www.health.arizona.edu>

1. Drink plenty of water to prevent dehydration

Water is essential to life and many of us do not drink enough. Our bodies can live for weeks without food, but only a few days without water. A healthful amount is 8-10 eight ounce glasses per day. That's over 64 ounces (2 liters) of liquid. It's O.K. to drink juice or milk to meet your fluid needs. Don't count caffeinated drinks (colas, coffee, teas) or alcohol in the total. Caffeine and alcohol cause dehydration by triggering your kidneys to lose more water than you gain from drinking.

Always carry extra drinking water in your car if you are driving in the desert, away from urban areas. There are many "wide open spaces" in Arizona that don't have a Circle K or gas station around for many miles. If your car breaks down, you want to have enough water to sustain you in the heat.

2. Prevent heat-related illnesses

When inadequate water intake is combined with physical exertion, excessive heat, and low humidity, heat illness can result. Be aware of the signs and symptoms of heat-related illnesses such as:

- **dehydration** – headache, fatigue, lightheadedness

- **heat cramps** – muscle cramps
- **heat exhaustion** – nausea, dizziness, fainting

These conditions can all be helped by resting, drinking water, and eating some food to restore electrolytes (sodium and potassium in particular) to the body.

Heat stroke is a less common but potentially life-threatening emergency. If a person stops sweating, becomes confused, and has a high body temperature (Over 104° F) CALL 911!

3. Protect your skin: use sunscreen, cover up, avoid the sun at mid-day

No matter what color skin you have, overexposure can lead to sunburn, blisters, and (over the years) lead to early wrinkling and skin cancer. If you are untanned, fair-haired, fair skinned and light-eyed (blue or green) you are at greater risk for sunburn and its complications.

So what can you do?

- Avoid sun exposure when it is most intense between the hours of 10am-3pm.
- Cover up if you must be outside. Wear long sleeves and pants, a wide-brimmed hat, and sunglasses with ultraviolet (UV) protection.
- Use sunscreen with an SPF (sun protection factor) of 15 or greater. For sunscreen to work best, apply it 30 minutes prior to sun exposure. Reapply after several hours in the sun.

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4. Respect desert creatures

No doubt you have heard tales about rattlesnakes, gila monsters, scorpions, and tarantulas. Yes, we have them here, but they are rather reclusive and you'll be lucky if you get the chance to see any of them at all! Most of these desert creatures are VERY wary of humans and only attack if provoked. If you do happen to run across a desert critter, don't try to touch it, catch it, or poke it with a stick. That's how most bites occur – after a human initiates contact with the animal (not the other way around).

5. Desert storms

One of the most celebrated events in the desert is a summer "monsoon" rain storm. These intense, brief storms can bring lightning and flash flooding (quick, unexpected and large amounts of flowing water).

Lightning – To be safe, seek shelter during a thunderstorm. If you are in a house, stay away from the windows and avoid using electrical appliances (phone, t.v., microwave, computer). A safe place to be is inside a car (not a convertible!) with the windows rolled up. If you are outside, do not seek shelter under a tall tree. Avoid being where you "stand out alone or above" the surrounding landscape.

Flash flooding – When the dry, hard desert floor gets a burst of rain, the water has no place to go. The water often runs off in torrents, finding it's way into the canyons, "arroyos" or "washes" that lead into the normally dry riverbeds around Southern Arizona. The water accumulates quickly, resulting in "flash flooding". There are many unbridged road crossings at these washes. Entering a flooded crossing can be very dangerous. Every year, motorists become stranded or even swept away and drowned by the rushing water. NEVER attempt to drive your car across (or wade across) a roadway that is covered by running water. Turn around and take the time to find another (safer) route.

6. Be kind to yourself

Living in the desert takes some adjustment. Newcomers to the desert find that their skin is much drier and they often lack the energy they are accustomed to feeling. While most people do adapt quite easily, it can take others weeks to "acclimatize" to living in the desert. Take it easy when exercising or working outdoors and remember to drink lots of water.

Valley Fever

What is it?

Medically known as coccidioidomycosis, Valley Fever is a disease of the lungs that is common in the southwestern United States, particularly in Southern Arizona. An airborne disease, it is caused by a fungus that grows in the desert soil and is spread by winds or disturbance of the soil. Valley Fever is not spread from person-to-person.

What are the symptoms?

Most cases are very mild with most infected people having either no symptoms or flu-like symptoms requiring no medical attention. Those who seek medical care may have fatigue, cough, chest pain, fever, rash, headache, and joint pain. Rarely, a person may develop pneumonia, skin lesions, joint problems, or meningitis.

Who gets it?

About one-third of Tucson and Phoenix residents tested have had Valley Fever. People working in construction, agriculture, archaeology, have an increased risk of exposure and disease. People with compromised immune systems are at greater risk for disseminated disease.

What to remember

If you suspect you may have Valley Fever, inform your medical practitioner, especially if you become ill in a location outside of the southwest U.S. or northern Mexico. There is a specific blood test called a "cocci serology" needed to diagnose the disease.

For more information:

hotline: 800.470.8262, ext. 4777
<http://www.arl.arizona.edu/vfce>

On behalf of the staff at the Campus Health Service, we hope you enjoy your experience at The University of Arizona. If we can be of any assistance please call us:

Main switchboard at the Campus Health Service: **621.6490**

Health Promotion and Preventive Services: **621.6483**

Written by Lee Ann Hamilton, M.A., Health Educator



www.health.arizona.edu