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Summer Risks vs. Realities

The news media are so full of warnings about potential summer health hazards that you may wonder, as the season wears on, how anyone ever comes through unscathed.

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The news media are so full of warnings about potential summer health hazards that you may wonder, as the season wears on, how anyone ever comes through unscathed.

Recall, for instance, the summer of 2001, which *Time* magazine dubbed "The Summer of the Shark" after 50 swimmers were attacked off the coast of the U.S., and three died from their wounds. The next summer brought alarming reports of the rapid spread of West Nile virus. It had made its way from New York to California, infecting thousands and killing hundreds.

What you probably didn't hear, however, is that for every one unfortunate who met his end in the jaws of a shark, at least 1,000 drowned; and while 201 people nationwide died of West Nile infection in 2002, car crashes killed nearly 43,000.

Heralding the "Summer of the Shark" undoubtedly sold more magazines than "The Summer of the Dangerous Undertow" would have, but because of sensational reporting, or in the case of West Nile virus, aggressive public awareness campaigns, these relatively remote risks stay at the front of our minds.

"The topical rather than the important hazards tend to get the most attention," says National Safety Council spokesman John Ulczycki. "People may misinterpret or misunderstand where the real risk is."

Blood and Asphalt

According to Ulczycki, having an automobile accident is the gravest summertime threat. "For most age groups it is the No. 1 cause of injury death," he says. In summer, more cars travel the nation's roads for more miles, and more drivers are teenagers and young adults, who are especially prone to car wrecks. As a result, the months of June, July, and August have the highest rate of automobile fatalities.

Your local TV news may run a cautionary segment on barbecue safety after someone suffers burns from an exploding propane tank. Or you may be alerted to the dangers of cryptosporidium bacteria in swimming pools, as in a recent *New York Times* story. Ulczycki sees a problem when people fuss over these kinds of risks and then neglect to buckle the seatbelt when they get into a car.

Perhaps, he speculates, Americans have developed such a fatalistic attitude about car crashes that we've come to accept them as kind of natural phenomenon. At the National Safety Council, "we fundamentally don't accept that," he says.

If you're really concerned about living to see September, wear a seatbelt, drive defensively, and don't drive while drunk or drowsy.

Bicycling can be another perilous summertime activity. "About 85% of all bicycling fatalities are head injuries," Ulczycki says. So when you ride, it's best to wear a helmet, no matter how dorky it makes you feel.

"It's a cultural issue about wearing a helmet. I grew up in the '60s, and we didn't wear helmets when we were kids," Ulczycki says. It may be hard to make yourself put on a helmet when you've been riding for decades without one, but he says, "one fall and you won't have to worry about making that choice again."

Water Hazards

As the weather heats up, pools open and people take to lakes and the ocean in droves, to swim, boat -- and sometimes drown. Every year, at least 3,000 people drown in the U.S., making it the next most serious summertime risk, behind traffic accidents.

Some drown when they fall victim to strong rip currents or undertows. Others drown when they're stricken by a sudden health emergency, be it a heart attack or just a bad cramp, while out swimming alone. Still others foolishly dive into unfamiliar waters, hit a submerged rock or a shallow bottom, and drown when they're knocked unconscious or break their necks.

"If you don't know what's down there, don't dive into it," Ulczycki says; and for safety's sake, also swim with a buddy.

Kids aged 4 and younger drown more often in swimming pools than in natural bodies of water, and drowning is the second leading accidental killer for this age group. According to the CDC, most kids who drown in swimming pools at home had been out of their parents' sight for less than five minutes.

Boating also puts you at risk for drowning and other harm. The U.S. Coast Guard recorded more than 5,700 boating accidents in 2002, causing 4,062 injuries and 750 deaths. Drowning is the cause of death in most fatal boating accidents for all types of boats, excluding "personal watercraft," such as Jet Skis. The Coast Guard data also show that while more fatal accidents happen in the summer months, because more boaters are on the water, the *percentage* of deadly accidents is higher in colder months, particularly February, October, and November, when hypothermia quickly takes hold of people who go overboard.

Open motorboats (as opposed to cabin cruisers) are involved in the most boating deaths, as recklessness and speed play a big role. Sailors tend to be the safest bunch on the water; only one person died sailing in 2002. The Coast Guard report also notes that 440 deaths that year might have been prevented had the victims been wearing life vests.

Compared with the thousands of drownings and other injuries sustained on the water, the dozens of shark attacks seem like a paltry few. But sharks still hold powerful sway over our imagination, and it's hard not to envision a shark's-eye view of your own legs while you paddle in the ocean.

George Burgess is the director of the University of Florida Program for Shark Research and editor of the International Shark Attack File, which contains data on attacks from the mid-1500s to the present. Although most attacks occur in the U.S., and most of those are in Florida, "it's still uncommon when you consider the literally millions of person-hours that are spent in the water each year," he says.

People swim off the coast of Florida year-round, and sharks lurk in those waters all year, too. But in the mid-Atlantic region and the Northeast, swimming is limited to summertime, and sharks rarely venture as far north as Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts -- the actual location of the fictional Amity Island in *Jaws*, where there have been a total of three attacks in recorded history.

Around those parts, "your chances of encountering a shark, far less being bitten by one, are infinitesimally small," Burgess says.

Summertime Epidemics

You've likely heard by now that West Nile season has returned, along with the newly hatched swarms of summer mosquitoes.

In 2003, 9,862 cases of West Nile virus disease were reported to the CDC, which included 2,866 cases of severe West Nile encephalitis or meningitis. The other cases were classified as West Nile fever, which is milder. In all, 264 people died from West Nile infection, which is a miniscule number compared with the average of 36,000 who die from the flu each year.

"The fatalities are predominately among people who have severe West Nile virus disease, and who are over the age of 50," says Sue Montgomery, an epidemiologist with the CDC Division of Vector-Borne Diseases.

It's not possible to predict how bad an outbreak will be in a given area and to be able to guess at how great your risk is. "The virus hasn't been in this country long enough," Montgomery says.

From January 2004 to June 21, 2005, 2,539 West Nile cases and 100 deaths had been reported to the CDC.

Lyme disease is another summertime worry, especially for people living in New England and the mid-Atlantic states, where the disease is most densely concentrated. Warm weather sends people with bare legs out to hike and work in tall grass and underbrush, where ticks carrying the Lyme-disease bacterium await.

In 2002, the CDC recorded 23,763 cases, and the numbers have been steadily increasing since 1991. Lyme disease symptoms can be miserable, and even disabling if not treated properly, but fortunately it's rarely fatal.

Heat Wave

At least once a year, many Americans hear that the National Weather Service has issued a heat advisory for their area. "Beat the heat" tips are broadcast, and city officials set up emergency oases for those without air conditioning at home. But how deadly can hot weather be? To elderly people in stuffy rooms, kids and pets locked in hot cars, and anyone overexerting themselves -- very.

Three hundred people died from extreme heat in 2001, but from year to year the numbers can vary.

A major heat wave in 1980 killed more than 1,250 in the central and eastern U.S., according the National Weather Service, and may have indirectly claimed the lives of as many as 10,000. More recently, more than 500 people died in five days during a 1995 Chicago heat wave.

The National Weather Service uses a "heat index," which takes both air temperature and humidity into account, to determine how hot the weather really feels. A heat index in the 90- to 105-degree range means a risk for sunstroke, heat cramps, and heat exhaustion. The 105- to 130-degree range means that heat stroke, the deadliest kind of heat-related illness, is possible. Beyond that, heat stroke is considered "highly likely."

Under such conditions, you should take it easy, spend as much time in air-conditioning as possible, take cool dips or showers, and drink plenty of fluids. Probably, no one will have to twist your arm.

What Are the Odds of That?

The Danger	Lifetime Odds
Death by car accident	1 in 228*
Drowning death	1 in 1,081*
Bicycle accident death	1 in 4,857*
Death by excessive natural heat	1 in 10,643*
Death by lightning	1 in 56,439*

* National Safety Council.

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SOURCES: John Ulczycki, spokesman, National Safety Council. George Burgess, director, Program for Shark Research, University of Florida; editor, International Shark Attack File. Sue Montgomery, DVM, MPH, epidemiologist, CDC Division of Vector-Borne Diseases. National Safety Council. International Shark Attack File. CDC. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. National Weather Service. Chicago Public Library. *Boating Statistics, 2002*, United States Coast Guard. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, CDC, May 7, 2004. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, CDC, June 4, 2004.
