

OLDER AND WISER: Seniors should enjoy the summer sun safely

Properly preparing for the heat allows seniors to get outside and socialize while maintaining physical distance

[Margaret Coates](#) / North Shore News

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Apart from the COVID-19 virus challenges, summer heat can pose a risk to older people. But taking proper precautions can help seniors get outside and socialize safely, writes columnist Margaret Coates. photo Getty Images

Finally, it seems summer has appeared. After a month or so of iffy weather, the sun is set to shine a bit more, encouraging people to get out and enjoy the good weather.

For seniors who have been more isolated and challenged because of COVID-19 curtailing their usual activities, such as going to the seniors and recreation centres, the library, shops and so on, the good weather promises a bit more freedom.

The municipalities have opened some activities previously closed and some organizations have started a cautious reopening. Older people can now visit the park, attend or hold backyard physical distancing parties, walk along the beach or perhaps sit at the beach in anticipation of a swim or picnic lunch, and possibly take a class at a seniors centre.

However, older people need to continue to be careful as the COVID-19 virus is still prevalent in our communities. Seniors are still the major causality of the virus with most deaths occurring in the seniors population. Many older people have compromised immune systems and other age-related health issues which make them more susceptible to contracting the virus. In a recent update on COVID-19 in British Columbia, Dr. Bonnie Henry says let's not let our guard down, things could worsen, so everyone should keep up with measures to prevent transmission.

So, continue to take the sound advice from Dr. Henry and others to practice beneficial safety techniques, including washing your hands, physical distancing, perhaps wearing a face mask, especially indoors in crowded public spaces, avoiding big groups of people and keeping your social bubble small and safe. I have to say I am perhaps one of those people that others laugh at because of my restrictive measures, but getting the virus or maybe transmitting it to others is not something I am willing to risk.

Throughout the last few months of the pandemic, older people have been isolated more than usual, and it seems appropriate to allow more in-person (but with physical distancing) social connectedness. It is worrisome that some seniors are so isolated that this might impact their mental health and well-being. As I have often quoted before, one study found evidence that shows that lacking social connections can increase one's chances for early death to a similar degree to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Balancing opening on-site activities in organizations and keeping seniors safe has been challenging for those that want to see seniors regain their social connections. Organizations on the North Shore have been cautiously reopening some of their on-site activities such as pre-registered classes and outdoor events. Libraries are starting to let people visit their site but with reduced hours and many safety measures. I have been hearing "so far so good" news. Phone your nearest organization and see what they have to offer.

Apart from the COVID-19 virus challenges, summer heat can pose a risk to older people. A May 2019 article in Health Companions for Seniors says "Older adults do not adjust as easily to sudden changes in temperatures. Chronic medical conditions can impact how seniors' bodies react to heat. Prescription medicines can affect an older person's ability to regulate or adjust to temperatures, control perspiration, and handle sun exposure."

But with some simple and maybe some more complex strategies, older people can enjoy this time of year. Generally, the tips for staying safe in the summer heat are simple. One step is to stay hydrated. An article in an issue of On Health: Consumer Reports says "aging can dull your sense of thirst and temperature, increasing your risk of heatstroke, which can be dangerous or even deadly."

According to Health Canada, symptoms of heat illness can include dizziness or fainting, nausea or vomiting, headache, rapid breathing and heartbeat, extreme thirst, and decreased urination with unusually dark yellow urine. Health Canada suggests: "If you have any of these symptoms during extreme heat, move to a cool place and drink liquids right away."

Wear sunscreen and a hat – getting a burn is not fun and could cause other issues. Wear light clothing. While you do not have to get out the short shorts, you can get clothing in a protective, breathable, and light fabric to keep you cool. Exercising wisely is a good technique to enjoy the summer without getting overheated. You could spend time in your garden to improve endurance and reduce stress and if you do not have a garden, you might be able to set up some potted plants on your windowsill or balcony. Perhaps now you could also try some physical distancing walking with a friend or family member – the parks are open.

Getting older people back to some semblance of normal is a good thing, but let's do it responsibly to reduce the risks for seniors.

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