Safety in the sun

Protect yourself and your family while outdoors

By Damien Chambers and Ray Straub
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ASHEVILLE, N.C. — Several lives have been lost in the mountains of Western North Carolina this year, three in just the past few weeks. Waterfalls claimed two in separate incidents, and one woman was struck and killed by lightning on Max Patch Bald in Madison County.

But not all outdoor hazards are as dramatic as lightning strikes and waterfall accidents. Even relatively benign family activities such as camping, hiking, kayaking, fishing and biking require taking safety precautions.

Dr. Ellen Lawson frequently treats urgent care patients who come in from the outdoors with sprains, fractures, lacerations, severe sunburn, insect and animal bites, dehydration, and poison ivy rashes.

"With some care and planning, one can avoid many of these injuries and inconveniences," said Lawson, medical director for Sisters of Mercy Urgent Care.

Drink up

One key to safely enjoying the outdoors is proper hydration, so bring plenty of water and other hydrating fluids, such as Gatorade. Many experts recommend drinking about two liters of water a day, but strenuous activities may have your body thirsting for more.

Shoes and sunscreen

Christen McNamara, outdoor program coordinator for Asheville Parks and Recreation, suggests wearing appropriate shoes for the outdoors.

"There are a significant amount of foot injuries that are caused by people not wearing shoes that match the activity they are participating in."

Crocs, for example, are comfortable but "are not well suited for hiking in the mountains," she said.

Before you head out, be sure to apply a high-SPF sunscreen with UVA/UVB protection and give it about 30 minutes to soak in.

And just in case, always make sure somebody knows where you're going, and when you'll be back.



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Some parks in WNC allow and even monitor recreational rock sliding, but visitors should never risk venturing into the water or on slippery rocks above falls.

Critters, plants

While out in nature, check often for ticks. Most are large enough to be seen easily, but the really dangerous ones are deer ticks, which are tiny like a speck of pepper and can carry Rocky Mountain spotted fever.

"Remove the tick with tweezers as soon as possible, using a slow, steady motion, and make sure to get its head," Lawson said.

When in the woods and fields, make a conscious effort to keep yourself away from poison oak and the ubiquitous poison ivy. Familiarize yourself with how it looks: Each stem has three leaflets.

Trailside critters may seem cute and cuddly, but it's best to leave all wild animals alone.

Waterfall hazards

Of course, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure — particularly around the many waterfalls in the Carolinas.

"At Sisters of Mercy Urgent Care, we see a huge number of injuries from people slipping around waterfalls," said Lawson. "Be particularly careful to follow posted distance rules, and always be extra careful on wet rocks."

If you are hiking near waterfalls, consider taking a wilderness first aid course.

"The wilderness first aid course curriculum is customized to the surrounding environment," said Brandon Poole, workplace training coordinator for the Red Cross in Asheville.