

Child Accidents Rise In Summer

By Michael S. James

As summer approaches, more kids are heading outside and, unfortunately to the nation's emergency rooms, for falls, drowning and even deaths, a new study says. What can parents do?

Summer can be a season of fun for kids, but also one of death and injury, a new study shows.

The four-month period from May through August is the most dangerous time of year, with nearly 3 million medical emergencies and 2,550 deaths because of accidental injuries, the study finds. Those deaths represent 42 percent of the average annual total.

"The lazy, hazy days of summer are a lot deadlier than parents may recognize," says Angela Mickalide, program director for the National Safe Kids Campaign, a Washington-based group dedicated to the prevention of unintentional childhood injury.

According to *Trauma Season: A National Study of the Seasonality of Unintentional Childhood Injury*, the campaigns' study of six years of data (1991-96), accidents are the leading cause of death in children aged 14 and under, with kids 10 to 14 particularly vulnerable.

Mickalide says the study's findings confirm anecdotal reports from medical and public health professionals that child injuries and deaths from drownings, falls, and bike, pedestrian and motor vehicle accidents seem to spike every summer.

She says the reasons for summer being more dangerous are evident.

"Children are not sitting at their desks at school in a relatively protected environment," Mickalide says. "They're out riding their bikes, crossing the street, swimming ... [and] the days are much longer in the summer. So a kid has at least 14 hours of sunlight to be playing outside, so the exposure is more."

She adds that with more kids growing up in homes where both parents work year-round, the risk of unsupervised play may be rising.

The campaign advises parents and kids pay particular attention to safety in the summer months by making sure kids are supervised and use safety devices, such as life preservers for swimming and window guards for upper-story windows.

"While we encourage children to be active and spend time outdoors, they need to understand the consequences of not taking safety precautions and should remember to wear a bike helmet and ride restrained in the car," says Dr. C. Everett Koop, the former U.S. surgeon general, in a written statement released to the press with the study. Koop is chairman of the National Safe Kids Campaign.

Mickalide points to increased use of safety devices and a 35 percent decline in annual accidental child deaths from 1988 to 1998 as evidence the devices are effective.

"All of the safety rules that every generation of kids has been taught, they have to adhere to that," she says. "They need to understand that injuries are the leading cause of death among kids. It's teaching kids to be responsible partners with their parents."