

Sweat Lodges: Health Risks

A sweat lodge (sweat house, medicine lodge, or medicine house) is essentially a ceremonial sauna, generally based on a Native American tradition. They can be permanent or portable dome or tepee-like structures, within which water is poured over heated rocks to generate steam. Spiritual rituals are conducted within the heated environment. Due to the intense, uncontrolled heat generated, potential health risks are associated with their use.

As recommended by the Coroner, the Department of Health provides the following advice and recommendations.

Health Risks:

The use of sweat lodges can be potentially dangerous, due to prolonged exposure to high temperatures in a confined space. Rituals conducted in remote areas can also mean that there is limited access to communications and medical facilities if required. It is important for all participants to recognise the symptoms of heat-related illness which can include; thirst, weakness, nausea, emotional instability, headache, increase in body temperature, pulse and respiration rate, dizziness, indistinct speech, confusion, delirium, swollen tongue, inability to swallow, and painful urination.

Severe or untreated heat illness can result in death.

If a person shows these symptoms, it is important to move them to a cool area. Remove their clothing, and fan them to cool the body down (do not douse in water or ice). Fluids should be given as tolerated (water or ½ strength electrolyte solution) and First Aid / medical assistance sought immediately.

Recommendations:

- > The conductor of a sweat lodge should be aware of the risks and the need to plan to protect the health and well being of all participants
- > Participants should be trained in First Aid and be able to identify the symptoms of heat related illnesses and other conditions requiring medical treatment
- > Arrangements should be in place to ensure urgent, medically supervised and monitored treatment can be provided
- > The health and fitness of participants should be assessed by a GP in advance
- > Participants should be adequately nourished and hydrated
- > Alcohol or drug use should be avoided in the days leading up to a sweat lodge
- > Periods of rest from the heat should be taken where required
- > Lodge construction should enable adequate air-flow
- > Light-weight cotton clothing should be worn
- > Jewellery, contact lenses and synthetic clothing should not be worn as the heat may cause these items to melt or burn
- > Rocks containing air and heat damp rocks should not be used, as they could crack and explode, causing injury
- > Be aware that any chemicals used on (or present in) plant material that is burnt or indirectly heated could release toxins that may be subsequently inhaled by participants
- > An adequate communication and evacuation plan should be developed for implementation in the event of a medical emergency (consider use of a mobile phone, CB radio and/or GPS device and ensure there is appropriate coverage)
- > Participants should take care to assess the character, antecedents (background) and belief systems of persons conducting sweat lodges

For more information

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www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/enviro-health-index.htm