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People with mental illnesses at higher risk of heat-related illness and death

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MONTGOMERY – The Alabama Department of Mental Health is encouraging Alabamians to stay hydrated, especially those with mental illnesses. Alabamians always expect July and August to be hot, but 2012 promises to be an exceptionally warm year in the South. When the temperature rises above 90 degrees Fahrenheit, people with serious mental illnesses are particularly vulnerable to heat-related illness and death.

ADMH Medical Director Dr. Timothy Stone says, “Individuals with mental illnesses need to stay hydrated during periods of extreme heat since their medications make them susceptible to heat stroke, and they are more likely to develop certain types of medication toxicities.” In addition to medications associated with heat intolerance, social factors also play a significant role for people with mental illnesses in terms of vulnerability to heat-related illness. Lack of awareness, access to air conditioning and social isolation puts this population at a greater risk of heat-related illness and death. Dr. Stone elaborates, “Each year in the summer, people with mental illnesses die from heat strokes because they and/or their caregivers may not be aware of the dangers. In addition, these individuals sometimes don’t have anyone checking in on them.”

To create greater awareness of this issue, Dr. Stone has written a report with more information on this topic. The report is featured on the ADMH website at www.mh.alabama.gov/COMD and includes tips for preventing heat-related illness, psychiatric medications associated with heat intolerance, what to do if one must be out in the heat, signs of heat exhaustion and heat stroke, and much more.

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