

## Never leave children in cars: a major risk of death through hyperthermia (heat stroke)

### Did you know that:

- During warm weather, car temperatures can rise 10 to 15 degrees Celsius every 15 minutes! Opening windows does not significantly slow down the rate of temperature change.<sup>1</sup>
- A child's body temperature rises 3 to 5 times faster than an adult's due to lower water reserves.<sup>2</sup>
- Hyperthermia can occur in as little as 20 minutes, and fatalities within 2 hours. Hyperthermia can occur on days as cool as just 22 degrees Celsius, when the inside of a car can easily reach 47 degrees Celsius.<sup>3</sup>
- Most of the victims of hyperthermia incidents in cars are between 0 – 4 years of age.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes parents intentionally leave a child in a car while running errands. However, the typical scenarios involve a busy parent forgetting that the child is in the car, for example on the way to work or the way home. Tragically, most parents do not even realise they had forgotten the child until the end of the day when they discover the body. These incidents occur to loving parents from all walks of life, so it is important that you do not assume it could not happen to you! There are also cases in which playing children enter a car or accidentally lock themselves in the boot of a car and become fatally entrapped.<sup>4,5</sup>

The French Consumer Safety Commission found that between 2007 and 2009, there were 24 cases of hyperthermia in children in cars, including five fatalities. 54% of the parents in these cases had intentionally left the child in the car, underestimating the risk; whereas 46% had simply forgotten the child was with them while driving to work or coming back home mostly.<sup>5</sup>

In the same period in Belgium two fatal hyperthermia incidents involving cards were recorded.<sup>5</sup>

In Israel between 2004 and 2008 there were four fatal cases of hyperthermia resulting from children being left in cars, and in 2008 alone, 19 non-fatal cases.<sup>5</sup>

Netherlands, Iceland and Hungary have also reported fatal cases of hyperthermia as the result of children being left in cars.<sup>5</sup>

In the United States an average of 36 children die from hyperthermia each year after being left in a car, for a total of 468 deaths over the last 12 years.<sup>3</sup>

### Prevention Tips

- Dial 112 immediately if you see a child or children alone in a car.
- Place your personal items (purse, telephone, briefcase) on the floor of the backseat. That way you are more likely to remember that the child is with you when you exit the car.
- Place the child's personal items (diaper bag, bottle) in the front seat as a reminder to you.

- Add a “reminder” to your computer calendar programme or telephone to ask if you dropped your child/children off at day care/pre-school today.
- Whenever there is a change in drop off and pick up arrangements, confirm the plans with your partner.
- Arrange that your day care provider or babysitter will call you if the child is not dropped off when expected.
- Lock your car doors and trunk once everybody has exited the vehicle. Keep keys out of reach of children.

## References

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3. Booth J, et al. Hyperthermia deaths among children in parked vehicles: an analysis of 231 fatalities in the United States, 1999 – 2007. *Forensic Sci Med Pathol* 2010; 6:99; 105.
4. Weingarten G. *Fatal Distractions: Forgetting a Child in the Backseat of a Car Is a Horrifying Mistake. Is it a Crime?* The Washington Post. 8 March 2009.
5. French Consumer Safety Commission. Recommendation on the prevention of leaving children unattended in motor vehicles. Adopted in session 10 December 2009. Available at: [http://www.securiteconso.org/english\\_version.php3](http://www.securiteconso.org/english_version.php3)