

08-31-18 Cool Tips Hot Ideas

We are experiencing the forecasted consequences of climate change, aren't we? We are seeing more intense weather events such as winter storms, hurricanes, tornadoes and now, heat waves; long lasting, numerous heat waves. Even if you want to debate the causes of the climatology, we still must deal with it, right?

Sometimes we must look to the past to find the answers for the future, and the present, too. One of the dilemmas for dealing with heat waves is trying to avoid the effects of heat stress and balancing those related needs with the use of and cost of energy use for air conditioning.

Here's an idea from the past addressing both concerns with "old fashioned ideas" of evaporation and fans. When my children were young, and I did not own an air conditioner, the way we kept cool, especially at night in order to sleep, was this: Just before bed, prepare wash cloths, hand towels and thin bath towels by soaking them in cold water (as cold as you can make it!). Wring them out as much as possible, so that they are no longer dripping water. (I suppose I could have put them in the washing machine on gentle spin cycle, considering that I was preparing these for six children, but I didn't think of it!)

Place the wet, wrung out cloths on the body, as they fit: wash cloths on foreheads, hand towels on arms, bath towel on legs, etc. This takes place at bedtime, of course, after the children have brushed their teeth and washed up, but it also can be used for "rest time". You know, those times when you cannot say the word "nap". You might call it "quiet time" or "reading time". After everybody is resting in place with the cold wrung-out cloths, turn on the fans!

This method of combining the wet cloths with moving air initiates evaporation. Evaporation equals cooling! In fact, even in the hottest weather, you quickly become so cool that you can cover up with at least a sheet and fall off to sleep; yet, because the cloths are sufficiently wrung out of excess moisture, the bed remains dry.

Opened windows, protected by screens, the use of fans and wet, wrung-out cloths offer a solution to both the safety/health needs related to extreme heat and the need to reduce energy use during these events. When you think about it, the achievement of both goals is quite a challenge. We can go to the mall during heat waves, but for how long and do what? We might have the option of a "cooling center" at the cost of the town, at a gymnasium or school, just as we have

"warming centers" during the winter. Yet, come evening, how do we sleep and conserve energy? If we have fans and towels and water, we can do that, rather than the constant use of air conditioning, all thanks to the evaporation factor.

Not only did I raise my children without air conditioners, I grew up without them also. Times sure have changed! In my childhood, I didn't know anyone with an air conditioner; that is until the week we were hit with very hot dry weather, which is so unusual for New England. The typical "triple H" of hot, hazy and humid, is what we are accustomed to suffering with moans and groans. So, when my father realized we had hot and dry, he was not only delighted but he realized he had the rare opportunity to make a "swamp cooler". He rigged up a screened in box-like arrangement of wire mesh packed with the thin curly strips of wood sometimes used for shipping, resembling wooden threads. Over the top of this absorbent packing material, he arranged tubing to drip water. This whole set up was on the outside of the window and inside the open window was a large box fan pulling air inward, through the wet fibers. We were the only family with an air conditioner that week! It was wonderful, and my siblings and I did not want to leave it. I remember looking through it at children playing outdoors, who were staring at this contraption, and being thankful that I was inside receiving the cool breeze. It was glorious while it lasted! And we had so much fun making noises through the fan when we realized the swamp cooler was also a voice transformer. It was very cool indeed!

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. You can tell her your cool ideas at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us