WITH summer in full swing, here are a few tips for staying cool, dealing with the sun’s radiant energy, managing poison ivy and warding off insects that like summer as much as you do, in order to avoid summer’s seasonal woes from creeping up on you when you least expect them, says the August 2011 issue of the *Harvard Men’s Health Watch*. 

While most of us enjoy summertime, we must follow important health tips to help us stay safe and healthy, with the many challenges of the dog days of summer:

• Heat and humidity — Normally, your metabolism always generates heat, but when you exercise, your muscles crank out 20 times more. This is fine, if the body heat can pass out into cool air. However, cooling becomes difficult, then impossible, as the temperature rises. Also, as the humidity rises, the evaporation of sweat — which can likewise take away lots of body heat — becomes difficult, then impossible, says the letter.

As a result, heat that can’t be shed externally remains trapped in the body, causing problems to develop, which can be mild (muscle cramps), serious (heat exhaustion) or lethal (heat stroke).
A few simple precautions are offered to keep you from overheating during the hot, humid days of summer:

1.) Avoid sunlight — Schedule your outdoor activity in the early morning or the evening, to avoid direct sunlight and take advantage of the cooler temperatures.

2.) Wear light-colored, loose garments.

3.) Take it easy — Walk instead of jogging or use a cart instead of walking the golf course. Take breaks and quit early, adds the letter.

4.) Don’t exercise in extreme heat and humidity — Take a day off or head for the pool — or an air-conditioned health club — if it’s humid and above 80 or 85 degrees Fahrenheit.

5.) Drink plenty of water — Before you get started, drink 6 to 8 ounces of water and pause frequently to drink. Even if you don’t feel thirsty, drink again on your way to the shower.

6.) Stay cool at home — Use an air conditioner or fans. If you can’t cool your house, go somewhere cool when it’s really hot and humid.

7.) Listen to your body — Fatigue, weakness, confusion, lightheadedness, nausea, labored breathing, chest discomfort or a rapid or erratic pulse can all be signs of trouble. If you feel ill, get into a cool place and drink plenty of water. If you don’t improve promptly, get help.

Sunshine: Protect your skin

While it’s great to be outdoors in the summer — the sun is warm and bright — too much sunshine will give you a painful burn and, over time, even a “healthy tan” can cause trouble: sun
exposure will build up to increase your risk of melanomas and other skin cancers and will also produce premature aging and wrinkling of the skin.

1.) Sunlight contains two forms of ultraviolet rays: UVA and UVB. Use a “broad spectrum” sunscreen to protect you from both. Ingredients, such as zinc oxide and titanium dioxide protect against both UVA and UVB ultraviolet rays while avobenzone and ecamsule are good for UVA and oxybenzone and octocrylene add UVB protection. Many sunscreen brands contain a mix of ingredients that provide protection against UVA and UVB.

2.) Use a sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher and apply it liberally — the most common mistake is using too little — 15 to 30 minutes before sun exposure. Then, reapply the sunscreen every two hours and after you swim or dry yourself with a towel. Even sweating can wash away protection, warns the letter.

3.) Stay in the shade when you can, especially between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., when the sunrays are strongest. Don’t let sunscreen give you a false sense of security — the only foolproof protection is to avoid sunlight as much as possible.

4.) Wear a hat with a big brim, pants and long sleeves.

5.) If you slip up and get burned, your skin will be red, sore and swollen. Cold compresses will be soothing. To help relieve inflammation and pain, try aspirin and other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (ibuprofen, naproxen and others) or acetaminophen (Tylenol and other brands). For a severe sunburn, you’ll need extra fluids and rest and a steroid lotion or spray may also help.

Sunny skies: Protect your eyes

The ultraviolet rays of the sunlight can damage your eyes, particularly the cornea, every bit as much as your skin, warns the health letter.
Even a single intense exposure can cause photokeratitis, or sun blindness — the symptoms are pain and light sensitivity, often accompanied by redness, tearing and uncontrollable blinking.

Fortunately, the cornea will usually repair itself in 12 to 48 hours.

However, cumulative damage to the lens may result from repeated low-level ultraviolet exposure, ultimately causing the development of cataracts.

To prevent both problems, use sunglasses with high-quality lenses that screen out UV rays:

1.) Look for sunglasses rated “general purpose” that absorb at least 95 percent of ultraviolet B rays and 60 percent of ultraviolet A.

2.) Avoid lenses that are rated as “cosmetic.”

3.) For intense exposures, choose glasses with a “special purpose” rating — they absorb 99 percent of UVB.

Problem plants:

Poison ivy, oak and sumac can all cause contact dermatitis, which develops when the skin comes in contact with a chemical that triggers an allergic reaction.

The skin is red, swollen and itchy and, in severe cases, small blisters crop up and clear fluid may seep from the skin.
To relieve this condition:

1.) Don’t scratch or rub the inflamed skin.

2.) Compresses of cool, clean water can be soothing.

3.) Steroid ointments will speed healing — Mild preparations such as hydrocortisone are available over the counter, stronger medications by prescription.

4.) In severe cases, your doctor may prescribe a steroid pill, such as prednisone.

5.) Remember that the best treatment is prevention by learning to recognize and avoid pesky plants.

**Insect bites and stings:**

While most insect bites are little more than a nuisance, causing a brief discomfort and a mild itch, even the mildest bite can sometimes have major consequences if the insect happens to be a mosquito carrying West Nile virus or a tick carrying the spirochete that causes Lyme disease.

However, other bites can cause considerable pain and swelling — and a few can trigger life-threatening allergic reactions in sensitive individuals.

The health letter offers a few self-help measures regarding bites:

1.) Try to avoid all insect bites, although most are mild and harmless.
2.) Clean out spider webs, hives and nests; better still, get professional help if you’re not sure how to do it safely.

3.) When you’re in an area with lots of ticks, wear shoes, socks, long sleeves and pants, button your shirt cuffs and tuck your pant legs into your socks. Light-colored garments will give you your best shot at spotting ticks.

4.) Avoid bright colors, floral patterns and sweet scents that attract bees.

5.) Stay behind screens between dusk and dawn, when mosquitoes rule.

6.) Use insect repellents — Products containing DEET (chemical name, N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide) are best for mosquitoes, ticks, flies and fleas. Preparations with 10 percent to 30 percent DEET are safe and effective for adults — protection lasts for several hours, but diminishes with swimming and heavy perspiration. Newer products containing picaridin appear as effective as DEET, and oil of eucalyptus (also known as PMD) can also help.

7.) For extra protection against ticks, spray permithin on your clothing — a single application will last for up to a week.

Thus, one can enjoy the great outdoors in summertime by preventing bites and stings, and by adding sun protection and simple measures to avoid pesky plants, concludes the health letter.