- Diseases / Health

Is air-conditioning making people sick?

The Korea Times · 19 Jul 2021 · 13 · By Yoon Ja-young yjy@koreatimes.co.kr

It seems that life without air conditioners is now unimaginable in Korea, where summers are getting hotter every year. Many people, however, are suffering from a range of symptoms, such as headaches and fatigue, which appear to be side effects of the exposure to too much air-conditioning. In Korea this condition is called "naengbangpyeong" and is often translated here as "air-conditioningitis."

"People get air-conditioningitis when they use too much air-conditioning. When they are frequently exposed to a more than 5- or 6-degree Celsius temperature gap between the indoors and outdoors due to air-conditioning during the hot summer, the autonomic nerve system fails to quickly adapt to it and leads to symptoms such as headache, chills or muscle aches, which are similar to the symptoms of a cold," said Professor Seo Min-seok of the Family Medicine Department of Incheon St. Mary's Hospital.

Symptoms frequently reported by those with air-conditioningitis include losing the ability to concentrate at work, headaches and fatigue. They also may get a dry nose and throat, as well as feel cold. They may also become dizzy or sleepy and experience symptoms including indigestion, constipation and diarrhea. They also may experience swelling of the face, hands or feet, as peripheral blood vessels contract in reaction to the temperature changes.

It can become worse if people don't open windows for ventilation so as to stabilize room temperature. Since room humidity stays low, one's respiratory organs may become dry and the bronchial tubes sensitive, leading to symptoms such as a sore throat, coughing and a runny nose.

"Anyone can get air-conditioningitis in summer but it can be prevented by maintaining the appropriate indoor temperature and making sure to open the windows for ventilation frequently. The temperature gap between the indoors and outdoors should not exceed 5 or 6 degrees Celsius. It is also helpful to avoid the cold air from air-conditioner directly hitting the body," Seo said.

Potentially life threatening Legionella bacteria can grow in the water of the cooling towers of large buildings. These bacteria can cause Legionnaires' disease with symptoms similar to the flu or pneumonia in people with weak immune systems.

A person should suspect they have Legionnaires' disease if they experience symptoms similar to those of air-conditioningitis but which are more severe or last longer.

Seo said that air-conditioningitis symptoms usually disappear within a few days without any treatment if one stops using the air conditioner. So if someone displays such symptoms, turn off the air conditioner and make sure there is enough ventilation.

Rest is recommended to aid recovery. Windows should be opened every two to four hours for ventilation and the recommended humidity level should be 50 percent to 60 percent. Also, air conditioner filters should be cleaned and replaced regularly to prevent bacterial growth.

"To stay healthy in summer, it is important to exercise and maintain a regular lifestyle as well as avoid stress. Taking a walk or light exercise that isn't overly taxing to your body is recommended," he added.