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Never Bitten, Twice Shy: The Real Dangers of Summer

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August, the peak of summer vacation season, a time for rest, relaxation and, well, risking our lives. Warm weather and free time entice many Americans to do things that increase the chances we will be seriously injured but do we fear the right ones? When asked in the abstract about the term "risk," Americans correctly tend to talk in terms of statistical probability, about the chances that something bad will happen. Yet when they are faced with specific threats, emotion overrules logic pretty quickly -- we fear the unlikely and are relatively unconcerned about the truly dangerous.

For example, dangers that primarily affect children evoke more concern than actions that pose an equal risk to adults. Risks that are man-made, like radiation from a nuclear plant, generally scare us more than natural things that are far more likely to harm us, like radiation from the sun. And something extremely rare that kills in a particularly dreadful way, like a shark attack, evokes more fear than something far more common that kills in a less gruesome manner, like a heart attack.

These subconscious patterns of risk perception also seem to affect the judgments of the people who bring us the news.

Between Memorial Day and Labor Day last year, major American newspapers and wire services ran 2,240 articles on West Nile virus, which kills fewer than 300 Americans a year, while there were 257 articles on food poisoning, which will kill more than 5,000 of us (beware that potato salad!).

Our emotional response to perceived risks has apparently evolved as an effective way to survive, but it can sometimes lead to behaviors that actually raise our risk. It may feel safe to go out in nature's sunshine for a few hours without sunscreen, but it's not. It may feel safe to avoid that walk in the woods to dodge West Nile virus or Lyme disease, but it would be a lot better for your health to give your heart, and probably your waistline, the exercise. On a larger scale, we often look for government protection from risks that hit our "fear buttons," and that can take money and attention from far greater threats.

So relax. Enjoy your summer. But stay safe out there.