

The Mysterious Reasons Why Many Koreans Won't Sleep Anywhere Near a Fan

By Paige Towers • September 30, 2016 at 1:00pm

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After graduating from college in 2008, I was in need of work in a not exactly booming job market, so I packed up and moved to Seoul, South Korea to teach English. Yet, I soon found myself in desperate need of something else: an electric fan. July brought grossly high temps and humidity, and the air conditioner positioned above my mattress gave me perpetual freon-induced headaches. Thus, one Sunday morning I headed out to a “home goods market” area but, when I attempted to communicate what I wanted by making whirring sounds and waving my arms about, one non-English speaking Korean clerk after another shook their heads and firmly said, “aniyo.”

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At work the next day, I asked my Korean manager about the mysterious lack of fans. “You don’t know about the fans?!” she yelled, shocked. What did I not know about the fans? That they stir up wind so that I can keep cool at night? That they might chop off your fingers if you accidentally get too close? But her answer was even more dramatic: “Fans will kill you while you are sleeping,” she said, and clutched her hand around her neck.

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an official title: “Korean fan death.”

As I soon learned, my manager’s words were representative of a larger cultural belief: death from sleeping with an active fan in a closed room (or even a room with open windows/doors depending on with whom you’re talking) is no joke to a large swath of the South Korean population, to the point where it’s adopted an official title: “Korean fan death.”

Although you can apparently find an electric fan more readily in South Korea these days, the fans still come equipped with ‘safety timers’ and rather severe warning labels. What’s the reasoning? As reported by The Atlantic

in 2012, several theories about ‘fan death’ can be found on the myth debunking site Snopes

. The most common? Hypothermia, suffocation and high levels of carbon dioxide.

Translation: Fans create strong winds when used for a long period of time. Do not sleep with a strong wind as it's very dangerous. Strong winds are very dangerous for causing hypothermia and respiratory distress in the young and elderly in particular.

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The science behind each is murky at best: The 'hypothermia theory' speculates that, "air blowing on a sleeping person [...] could lower body temperature to such a point that organ failure would result." The 'suffocation theory' purports that if a person sleeps with a fan on and the windows closed, "the sleeper uses up the oxygen trapped in the closed room, then dies of suffocation;" the 'carbon dioxide theory' brings it home with the idea that the motor of the fan lets off carbon dioxide, thus again "slowly suffocating the sleeping individual."

Other less oftentouted theories get even weirder: Some South Koreans believe that "the fan's blades chop of oxygen molecules, rendering such mutilated air unbreathable."

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My first thought was to chock all this up to an urban myth run wild. But, it turns out that this isn't a belief solely held by the civilian population: 'fan death' has been validated time and time again as a legitimate danger by the South Korean government, even in

Korea Consumer Agency press releases.

That's right: the Korean government reports an average of a dozen or so faninduced deaths each year. And

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although 12 lives lost to 'fan death' a year is a relatively small number for a country of roughly 50 million

— if the deceased actually died because of a fan — the fact that the government has confirmed 'fan death' to be a real threat is alarming.

After spending one year in Seoul, I started wondering why, exactly, did people think sleeping with a fan on could kill a person, and how did this belief become so prevalent in Korean culture in the first place?

The

First off, it's important to note that a country's citizens upholding a bizarre myth as truth is in no way unique to Korea — these weird little 'momisms' exist everywhere. (For instance, as an American, I'm still under the impression that I might cramp up and drown if I go swimming within 30 minutes of eating — which is, by the way.)

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totally unsubstantiated

But on Reddit,

a popular conspiracy is that the Korean government created fan death propaganda in order to reduce energy consumption. Another, much more common idea is that some Korean families cover up the suicide death of a family member by giving a convenient story — 'fan death.'

There's no substantial evidence for either of these theories, but many Redditors point to the South Korean tradition of 'saving face' — meaning to preserve dignity and avoid humiliation — as a reason why an invented story would be given in lieu of the truth. Others point to the Korean hierarchal culture where you are more obligated to acquiesce to the ideas and commands of your elders, thus explaining why the belief might be left unchallenged by some.

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In fact, although a “Do you believe that fans can kill you — yes or no?” poll has yet to be done, ‘fan death’ may have a generational gap. For instance, one Redditor

wrote, “I’m Korean. I don’t believe [in ‘fan death’], but my parents do. It’s a pain in the ass when I have the fan going during the summer and my parents, without fail, come into my room and turn it off while I’m sleeping. It’s fucking hot!”

But is there actually anything to worry about when you sleep beside a fan?

In order to find out if there was any validity to the fan death theory, I reached out to Dr. Laurence S. Kalkstein

, a professor at the University of Miami and a bioclimatologist who specializes in the impact of weather on human health. Dr.

Kalkstein has also worked with the Korean government to develop heat health warning systems in the past, and once — in a classic cultural misunderstanding moment — accidentally placed himself in the ‘pro’ section of the ‘fan death’ believers when a Korean journalist asked him whether he believed in fan death or not.

Wikipedia

“I had never heard of it,” Kalkstein told me. “So I said, ‘yes, I do think fans can kill you if it’s very hot out.’ The next thing I read is ‘Kalkstein believes in fan death.’ [...] I didn’t realize I opened a Pandora’s Box because they thought I was supporting their fan death theory. I was not.”

Since then, Dr. Kalkstein’s name has popped up in a few South Korean articles and blogs supporting the theories behind why fans can kill, but he states that, “the way Koreans believe the fan death theory is mostly myth and it’s not accurate. People are not going to suffocate in a room with fans.”

That said, fans can

be potentially dangerous in a certain situation, which is why Dr. Kalkstein provided that affirmative answer to the journalist.

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“The way Koreans believe the fan death theory is mostly myth and it’s not accurate. People are not going to suffocate in a room with fans,” said Dr. Kalkstein.

“Humans do not do well in a hot internal environment, especially if a fan is right in front of them,” Dr. Kalkstein said. “Let’s say an elderly person is not drinking enough [water], the room is 95 or 100 degrees [...] and he’s sitting there in front of a fan. The problem is that the fan is increasing what we call evaporation opportunity. That is, it is evaporating any moisture, sweat, whatever is on the skin, at a faster rate than would be happening if he was not sitting in front of a fan.”

Dr. Kalkstein went on to say that unless that person is drinking a lot of fluids, he/she could potentially suffer from dehydration.

Potential 'fan death' can also be thought of through Dr. Kalkstein's analogy of a convection oven and a potato (and yes, in this case, a human is the potato):

"A convection oven cooks faster at the same temperature because it's creating a breeze — there's a fan inside that oven. That's why if you put a potato in at 300 degrees and it's a convection oven it will cook faster than at 300 degrees if it's not a convection oven without any fan. Same thing here. If a person is very hot and is sitting in front of a fan in an enclosed room, fans can be very dangerous because they help increase the loss of moisture from the body."

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fan in an enclosed room, fans can be very dangerous because they help increase the loss of moisture from the body.”

So while fans could potentially worsen an already dangerous situation, they do not — as my Korean manager once suggested — deprive you of air. By the end of our conversation, Dr. Kalkstein reiterated the falsehood of the belief. “Fans don’t chop up oxygen molecules,” he says. “They don’t do any of these things that the Koreans think they do.”

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