

Avoid the (Heat) Stress of Work

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When temperatures and humidity rise, workers become at risk for heat-related illnesses, some of which can be fatal. Heat-related illnesses - or heat stress - results when the body becomes overly stressed trying to cool itself. To safeguard worker health in hot conditions, employers need to train workers to recognize the signs of heat stress and know how to prevent, control, and respond to its effects.

The best way to avoid heat stress is to prevent it from occurring in the first place. Before work, supervisors should assess the weather, the demands of the job, and the condition of the worker. Heavy work should be scheduled for cooler hours and non-essential tasks postponed for cooler days. Jobs should be rotated with periodic breaks scheduled. Access to cool, shaded areas must be made available to any worker suffering from heat illness or needing shade to prevent the onset of illness.

Workers should dress for high heat conditions, including long-sleeved, loose-weave cotton shirt and long pants; lightweight protective gear; a neck scarf; a brimmed hat; and sunscreen when outdoors. Removing clothing can increase the risk sunburn and other heat-related illnesses.

Adequate drinking water or electrolyte drinks should be readily available and accessible throughout the day. Workers should know where these fluids are located and be encouraged to drink about two glasses of water before beginning work and continue to drink water or other non-alcoholic cool drinks during and after work to replace what may be lost during the work day.

Heat stress is a silent hazard because its onset can be difficult to recognize. A worker may not realize that there's a problem until it's well advanced. So, workers should be taught to recognize symptoms of heat stress and know basically what to do about it.

* A **mild** heat reaction may result in skin eruptions (red bumps on the skin and a prickling sensation called "prickly heat"), heat cramps (painful muscle spasms during or several hours after activity), dizziness or fainting. The victim may also show signs of impaired physical or mental performance. In cases of mild or moderate heat stress, the victim should be taken to a cool place to rest and given water to drink.

* A worker with a **moderate** degree of heat illness may experience heat exhaustion (excessive sweating, cold, moist, pale or flushed skin, thirst, extreme weakness or fatigue, headache, nausea, lack of appetite, a rapid but weak pulse or giddiness). Without proper treatment the victim may collapse.

* In **severe** cases of heat illness a heat stroke may result. With heat stroke there's no sweating, the skin is hot, dry, flushed, red, mottled or bluish. The victim has deep, rapid breathing, delirium and may experience a loss of consciousness or convulsions. This condition is fatal unless emergency medical treatment is obtained.

Workers can work safely in hot conditions if they dress properly, stay hydrated, and remain alert to early signs of heat-related health effects. □