Heat in the Field: Recognizing & Preventing Heat Stress in Outdoor Work Meeting Kit

WHAT’S AT STAKE

Working outdoors means working in conditions your body must constantly fight against, and heat is one of the most dangerous. High temperatures physically demanding tasks put intense stress on the body, even when workers feel “used to it.” Heat stress doesn’t always start with dramatic symptoms; it often begins with small signs.

WHAT’S THE DANGER

Heat stress is dangerous because it builds quietly and quickly. Workers can go from feeling “a little tired” to suffering heat exhaustion or even heat stroke, which is life-threatening and requires immediate medical attention.

Heat Overwhelms the Body Faster Than You Think

The combination of high temperature, direct sunlight, and physical labor forces the body to work hard just to cool itself. When sweating isn’t enough, internal temperature rises, the heart works faster, and dehydration kicks in long before workers feel truly thirsty.

Early Symptoms Are Easy to Miss – Heat stress rarely begins with a dramatic collapse, it starts small.

- Headaches
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Fatigue or irritability
- Muscle cramps
- Nausea

Heat Exhaustion Can Turn into Heat Stroke and Conditions Can Make It Worse

Heat exhaustion brings heavy sweating, weakness, confusion, and a rapid heartbeat. If these signs are ignored, it can escalate into heat stroke, a medical emergency where the body can no longer cool itself, sweating stops, and core temperature rises to dangerous levels. Heat stroke can cause seizures, loss of consciousness, organ failure, and death without immediate treatment.

Environmental factors make this progression even faster: high humidity prevents sweat from evaporating, hot equipment radiates additional heat, and PPE traps warmth close to the body. Even experienced workers can be overwhelmed when conditions shift suddenly.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Working safely in hot outdoor conditions is not about being tough. It is about giving your body what it needs to stay cool and recover. Heat stress can affect anyone, even experienced workers, so the focus is keeping your temperature down and preventing symptoms before they start.

Hydrate and Fuel Your Body

Drink water regularly throughout the entire day. Do not wait until you feel thirsty because thirst is a late sign of dehydration. Use electrolyte drinks when you sweat heavily. Avoid energy drinks and sugary beverages because they make dehydration worse.

Take Real Breaks and Cool Down

Breaks are essential on hot days. Step into the shade or a cooler area whenever possible so your core temperature can drop. A few minutes of cooling helps prevent dizziness, headaches, and exhaustion. Rotate physically demanding tasks so no one stays in the heaviest work for too long.

What to Do to Stay Safe in Extreme Heat

- Wear lightweight and breathable clothing
- Use hats, sunscreen, cooling towels, and sun protection
- Work at a steady pace instead of rushing
- Take short cooling breaks before symptoms begin
- Watch for early signs like cramps, headaches, dizziness, or irritability
- Report symptoms right away

Plan for Heat and Adjust Your Workload

Heat risk can change quickly. High humidity slows down sweat evaporation. Hot equipment radiates heat. Personal protective equipment traps warmth near your body. When you notice conditions getting hotter, drink more water, take more breaks, and slow the pace. Starting work early in the day helps you avoid the hottest hours.

FINAL WORD

Heat does not give warnings for long. No one should work alone in extreme heat, watching out for each other can prevent a serious medical emergency.