How to Keep Your Cool When Working in Hot Weather

What’s at Stake

Your body has a marvelous ability to regulate its internal temperature through sweating and the cooling effect caused by the evaporation of sweat. But there are a number of factors that can interfere with this process and cause your body temperature to spike, resulting in heat illness.

What’s the Danger

In hot conditions, it doesn’t take much exertion to work up a sweat. But if we aren’t drinking enough water to replace what we are losing through sweating, we can easily become dehydrated and be at risk for dangerous, potentially fatal heat illness.

Other factors that can put workers at risk for heat illness include:

- High humidity, which makes it difficult for sweat to evaporate,
- Excessive clothing or dark clothing,
- Working in direct sunlight,
- Increasing age,
- Medical conditions such as diabetes, heart disease or kidney problems,
- Certain medications, and
- Being overweight.

Types of Heat Illness

The first and mildest form of heat illness is heat cramps that appear suddenly in the hands, calves, feet or other muscles. Heat cramps are caused when the body loses fluid and salt though physical activity in hot conditions and are not uncommon if the

person isn’t used to working in high temperatures.

Heat exhaustion is the second phase of heat illness. Symptoms include chills, loss of coordination, fainting, dizziness, profuse sweating, headache, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea and stomach cramps.

Without treatment, heat exhaustion can progress to potentially deadly heat stroke, where body temperature spikes toward 106°F or 41°C. The victim can easily lose consciousness, experience convulsions and die. Symptoms include headache, nausea/vomiting, dizziness, fatigue, shortness of breath, rapid heart rate, hot, flushed and dry skin, decreased sweating, confusion, anxiety, delirium and convulsions.

How to Protect Yourself

The most important thing you can do to prevent heat illness is to drink enough water to stay hydrated. Don’t wait until you are thirsty to drink. You should be drinking about one cup of water every 15 to 20 minutes.

If you are experiencing heat cramps, tell your supervisor. Rest in a shaded area and have a sports drink to replace salt lost through sweating.

A person experiencing symptoms of heat exhaustion needs to be taken to a shady and cool area, given water and cooled by air conditioning, a fan, a water spray or wet towels.

The person should be given water or a sports drink, but only if he or she is fully alert and not nauseated. If the symptoms improve after a few minutes, the worker should still be checked out by a medical professional.

If symptoms do not improve or they worsen, heat exhaustion could be moving into deadly heat stroke. The worker needs to be transported to a medical treatment facility without further delay.

Along with ensuring that you are staying well hydrated, the following tips will help you

avoid heat illness while working outdoors.

- Try to take periodic rest breaks in a shady, cooler area.
- Wear light-colored, loose-fitting clothing.
- Talk to your supervisor about tackling the most physically demanding tasks during the morning, when it’s cooler.
- Try to work in the shade if you can. Wear a hat and don’t forget the sunscreen.
- If you are not used to the heat, pace yourself. Don’t heavily exert yourself until you are used to the heat.
- Watch out for signs of heat illness in yourself and your co-workers. Report any symptoms or concerns to your supervisor without delay.

Final Word

It’s easy to get caught up in the job and forget about the importance of staying hydrated and taking periodic rest breaks. Heat illness can occur quickly and if the victim isn’t removed to a cool area and treated, the situation can become life-threatening. Watch out for signs of heat illness in yourself and your co-workers and report any symptoms to your supervisor.