Killed By Heat

A small woodland fire was the scene of a workplace fatality when one firefighter died of heat stroke.

The young man was one of two affected by heat stroke that day. Two others were affected by heat exhaustion, a less serious form of heat illness. In fact, 80 percent of the crew battling that fire reported symptoms of heat illness. All but one survived.

The firefighters were building a fire line on a steep slope. They were dressed in standard fire-resistant clothing. Temperature was 98 degrees Fahrenheit (36 degrees Celsius) and relative humidity was about 30 percent.

While heat is an obvious danger in firefighting, it is also a danger in many other work settings. Kitchens, laundries, construction sites, recreation facilities, foundries, farms and many other work places get dangerously hot. Heat illness is not just a summer problem, either. Heat and humidity can be too high for safety in any season.

Heat stress among wildland firefighters is being reported with increased frequency. With the combination of high air temperature and radiant heat from the fire, a firefighter can easily become dehydrated. Preventive measures need to be part of the daily routine. Drinking water frequently, taking regular rest breaks in the shade, eating enough nutritious food and wearing clothes which allow air circulation are some of the precautions. Workers also need to monitor one another so they can help a potential victim cool off before a deadly heat stroke occurs.

Is the heat on for you this summer? Make sure you drink plenty of water or fluid replacement drink. Be aware of your own physical condition and fatigue level. Watch for signs of heat illness in your fellow workers, too.