Stay Safe Working in the Heat

What’s at Stake?

Every year, dozens of workers die and thousands more become ill while working in extreme heat or humid conditions. More than 40 percent of heat-related worker deaths occur in the construction industry, but workers in every field are susceptible. There are a range of heat illnesses and they can affect anyone, regardless of age or physical condition.

What’s the Danger?

The Heat

The combination of heat and humidity can be a serious health threat during the summer months. If you work outside (for example, at a beach resort, on a farm, at a construction site) or in a kitchen, laundry, or bakery you may be at increased risk for heat-related illness.

Heat-related Illnesses

There are three kinds of major heat-related disorders—heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke. You need to know how to recognize each one and what first aid treatment is necessary.

Heat Cramps are muscle pains usually caused by the loss of body salts and fluid during sweating.

Heat Exhaustion is the next most serious heat-related health problem. The signs and symptoms of heat exhaustion are:

- Headache
- Nausea
- Dizziness
- Weakness
- Irritability

- Confusion
- Thirst
- Heavy sweating; and
- A body temperature greater than 100.4°F.

Heat stroke occurs when the body's temperature regulating system fails and body temperature rises to critical levels (greater than 104°F). This is a medical emergency that may result in death! The signs of heat stroke are:

- Confusion
- Red, hot, dry skin – lack of sweating
- Loss of consciousness
- Seizures

How to Protect Yourself

When working in the heat take these general precautions:

- Drink small amounts of water frequently and take frequent short breaks in the shade.
- Wear light-colored, loose-fitting, breathable clothing—cotton is good.
- Eat smaller meals before work activity and avoid caffeine and alcohol or large amounts of sugar.
- Work in the shade if possible and realize that equipment such as respirators or protective coveralls can increase heat stress.
- Find out from your health care provider if your medications and heat don't mix.

Heat Cramps

If you experience heat cramps start replacing fluid loss by drinking water and/or carbohydrate-electrolyte replacement liquids (e.g., sports drinks) every 15 to 20 minutes.

Heat Exhaustion

Treatment and response for heat exhaustion:

- Get the person out of the heat or hot area and have them begin drinking liquids.
- Use a cold compress on their head, neck, and face to cool them, or have the worker wash his or her head, face and neck with cold water.
- Encourage frequent sips of cool water.
- Make sure that someone stays with them until help arrives. If symptoms worsen, call 911 and get help immediately.
- Otherwise, get the person to a clinic or emergency room for medical evaluation and treatment.

Heat Stroke

Workers experiencing heat stroke have a very high body temperature and may stop sweating. They may also not be aware of what is happening to them or be able to take care of themselves. This is a life-threatening emergency and you must get medical help immediately.

- Call 911.
- Until medical help arrives, move the worker to a shady, cool area and remove as much clothing as possible.
- Wet the worker with cool water and use a fan or fan the victim to move the air to speed cooling.
- Place cold wet cloths, wet towels or ice all over the body or soak the worker’s clothing with cold water.

Final Word

Working in the heat can be dangerous and deadly if you don’t take time to get used to it, drink plenty of water, and take frequent, shady rest breaks.