Feeling Hot, Hot, Hot? Stay Safe While Working in the Heat



What’s at Stake?

Symptoms of heat-related illnesses can range from annoying to deadly, and can progress quickly if the person doesn’t receive appropriate medical treatment.

The triple threat of high heat, high humidity, and strenuous work, both outside and indoors, can quickly lead to heat exhaustion and heat stroke if you don’t acclimate to the heat, take proper precautions when working in the heat, and pay attention to your body’s warning signals.

What’s the Danger?

Heat Rash

- Heat rash is a skin irritation caused by excessive sweating during hot, humid weather.
- It may look like a red cluster of pimples or small blisters.
- It often appears on the neck, groin or armpits.

Heat Cramps

- Heat cramps are caused when sweating depletes the body’s salt and moisture levels.
- Low salt levels in muscles causes painful cramps.

Heat Exhaustion

Heat exhaustion is the body’s response to an excessive loss of water and salt, usually through excessive sweating. It is a serious issue and must be addressed quickly.

Watch for these symptoms in yourself and co-workers:

- Extreme weakness or fatigue,
- Dizziness and confusion,
- Nausea,
- Clammy or moist skin,
- Pale or flushed complexion,
- Muscle cramps,
- Slightly elevated body temperature, and
- Fast and shallow breathing.

Heat Stroke

Heat stroke is a life threatening emergency. During heat stroke, the body's temperature rises rapidly, the sweating mechanism fails, and your body **cannot** cool down. Your body temperature can rise to 106° F or 41°C or more within 10 to 15 minutes. This condition can cause death or permanent disability if emergency treatment is not provided.

In addition to high body temperature, other symptoms of heat stroke include:

- Hot, dry skin and often a complete lack of sweating,
- Confusion and dizziness,
- Slurred speech, and
- Hallucinations, chills, or a throbbing headache.

How to Protect Yourself

Your employer can help you avoid heat illness by:

- Scheduling heavy physical work during the coolest parts of the day or even during cooler months of the year.
- Giving you and your co-workers a break from physically demanding tasks through job rotation.
- Providing plenty of water and cool, shady rest areas.

Employees can reduce the risk of heat stress by remembering three things.

1. **Be prepared:**
    - Wear light-colored, loose-fitting clothing made of breathable material such as cotton.
    - Be aware that protective clothing or personal protective equipment may increase the risk of heat stress.
    - Ask your doctor or pharmacist if any medications you are taking make you more susceptible to heat stress.
2. **Work Smart:**
    - Gradually build up to working in the heat. It can take up to two weeks to get used to hot working conditions.
    - Take frequent rest breaks in the shade or a cool area when possible.
    - Monitor yourself and your co-workers for symptoms of heat stress.
3. **Stay hydrated:**
    - Drink water frequently, especially before, during and after work.
    - You should be drinking approximately one cup (eight ounces or 250 ml) of water every 15 to 20 minutes.
    - If you feel thirsty you're already on the way to being dehydrated.

Final Word

Stay safe when working in the heat by being prepared, working smart, and staying hydrated.