

Hazards of Heat and How Employers Can Protect Workers

When it comes to protecting your workers, considering the effects of high heat and how it can negatively impact your workforce is imperative. Heat illnesses often occur and can lead to both health and safety issues for your business.

Why Is It Important to Know About Heat Illness?

Employers need to know about heat illness because it can be detrimental to an employee's wellbeing. It can also reduce worker efficiency and productivity and, in turn, increase the costs of doing business.

What is Heat Illness?

Heat illness is a medical condition that results when the body is unable to cope with the heat levels in its surroundings. The body is designed to rid itself of excess heat through sweating to maintain an optimal body temperature. If this heat dissipation can't happen fast enough, the body temperature continues to rise and can lead to a range of heat illness symptoms, some of them life-threatening.



Dangers of Working in the Heat

While often unavoidable, working in the heat can become detrimental to a worker's health. High numbers of workers, regardless of physical condition or age, become ill or even die as a result.

The four heat-related illnesses include:

Heat Stroke

The most severe of heat illnesses, heat stroke occurs when the body is unable to control its temperature, often resulting in an experience of mental confusion, disorientation, slurred speech, or unconsciousness.

Heat Syncope

Heat syncope is a fainting episode experienced by someone in a high heat environment.

Heat Cramps

The mildest heat-related illness is heat cramps and consists of painful muscle spasms and cramping.

Heat Exhaustion

Heat exhaustion occurs when the body is unable to cool itself down properly and results in a loss of salt and water in the body.

Heat Exhaustion is one of the most common heat illnesses that can occur on the job. Signs of heat exhaustion include:

- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Nausea or vomiting
- Thirst
- Heavy sweating
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Fast heart rate or elevated body temperature

To prevent heat exhaustion, workers need to:

1. Wear loose fitting, lightweight clothing
2. Drink plenty of water
3. Avoid excessive activity in the hottest part of the day
4. Take time to become acclimated

Employer Responsibility to Protect Workers

OSHA states that employers are responsible for providing a workplace that is free from any known safety hazards. One such safety hazard is extreme heat.

If your employees are exposed to high heat temperatures, you need to establish a heat illness prevention program with the following:

- Provide shady areas for workers to rest
- Provide cool water sources
- Allow time for workers to acclimate
- Train workers on ways to prevent heat illnesses
- Monitor for heat illnesses
- Plan for heat illness emergencies



Heat Illness Prevention Campaign

Launched in 2011, the OSHA Heat Illness Prevention Campaign focuses on educating workers and employers about the dangers and risks of working in heated environments.

Heat Illness Prevention Standard

Given that heat stress killed 783 workers and caused serious injuries to 69,374 others between 1992 and 2016, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, lawmakers appear to be taking a closer look at OSHA regulations. OSHA's Heat Illness Prevention Standard is found within the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970. The standard essentially is an employer's legal obligation to provide a workplace free of recognizable hazards that can cause workers severe physical harm or death. These conditions include heat-related risks.

3 Ways Management Can Prevent Heat Illness

1 Training

Train both your workers and supervisors to recognize and control heat hazards.

2 Implement Controls

Implement both engineering and administrative controls.

3 Rest, Shade, and Fluids

Provide workers with adequate rest, shady locations to rest, and access to plenty of fluids to stay hydrated.

How Can Employers Protect Heat-Exposed Employees?

As recommended by OSHA, employers with outdoor workers should follow these steps to prevent heat illness:



Plan

Develop and implement an effective written heat illness prevention plan that includes emergency response procedures.



Training

Train all employees and supervisors in heat illness prevention.



Water

Provide drinking water that is fresh, pure, suitably cool, and free of charge

so that each worker can drink at least 1 quart per hour and encourage workers to do so.



Shade

Provide shade when workers request it and when temperatures exceed 80 degrees. Encourage workers to take a cool-down and rest in the shade for at least five minutes. They should not wait until they feel sick to cool down.