

DEALING WITH THE HEAT!

Most of us are working in a hot environment during the summer and the increasing heat can be a struggle for employees.

It's widely reported that there's no legal maximum temperature at work, so there's no automatic right for employees to go home due to the extreme heat. Working environments vary, with some having great air-con and others having to simply open the windows.

Employees may also find the commute to work extremely uncomfortable as well as high office temperatures, especially if public transport is being used. Starting the day hot and dehydrated can be unpleasant and have an impact on productivity.

So, what can be done to help employees cope with the heat?

- Ensuring that the working environment has a comfortable working temperature
- Having a more relaxed dress code – ensuring it's appropriate for the environment
- Remaining hydrated – water should be readily available for everyone
- Keep sun cream and after sun close by as a reminder to stay sun-safe
- Management teams are reminded to take careful consideration of any employees with chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, kidney disease and heart conditions
- Consider introducing flexible working hours, e.g. working from home
- Make it fun! Implement ice-cream Fridays

Heat can also be a killer and it's important to understand the preventative steps to take to remain safe. There are three states of the effects of heat;

1. **Heat Cramps** – mild effect which can be managed locally
2. **Heat Exhaustion** – requires urgent action to prevent escalation
3. **Heat Stroke** – severe syndrome which requires emergency services

1. Heat Cramps

Heat cramps usually go away on their own, but you can try one of these home remedies:

- Rest in a cool place and drink a sports drink, which has electrolytes and salt, or drink cool water
- Make your own salt solution by mixing 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon table salt dissolved in a quart of water.

2. Heat Exhaustion

Heat exhaustion is a condition whose symptoms may include heavy sweating and a rapid pulse, a result of your body overheating. It's important to avoid the sun between 11:00 and 15:00 and take to the shade through the lunchtime hours.

Symptoms of heat exhaustion are;

- Sweating, pale and clammy with a fast pulse
- Confusion and headache
- Dark-coloured urine (a sign of dehydration)
- Dizziness or fainting
- Fatigue
- Headache
- Muscle or abdominal cramps
- Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhoea

If you suspect heat exhaustion, take these steps immediately:

- Move the person out of the heat and into a shady or air-conditioned place.
- Lay the person down and elevate the legs and feet slightly.
- Remove tight, heavy clothing or any personal protective clothing
- Have the person drink cool water or other non-alcoholic beverage without caffeine

3. Heat Stroke

Heat Stroke is the most serious syndrome which could be fatal. It's critical to understand the symptoms to ensure urgent action is triggered.

Symptoms of heat stroke are;

- Throbbing headache
- Dizziness and light-headedness
- Lack of sweating despite the heat – skin will feel hot and dry to the touch
- Red, hot and dry skin
- Muscle weakness or cramps
- Nausea and vomiting
- Rapid heartbeat, which may be either strong or weak
- Rapid, shallow breathing
- Altered mental state or behaviour
- Confusion, agitation, slurred speech, irritability, delirium, seizures

If you suspect heat exhaustion, take these steps immediately:

- **Call 911 or go to the Emergency Room**
- **Have the person drink plenty of water**

Prevent Illness and Stay hydrated!

Your body depends on water to survive. Every cell, tissue, and organ in your body needs water to work properly. For example, your body uses water to maintain its temperature, remove waste, and lubricate your joints.

The human body has roughly 2.6 million sweat glands, and for workers to replace lost fluids, they should drink water every 15 minutes - FOUR CUPS OF WATER per hour. Water is the preferred choice of beverage over soft drinks or coffee, because caffeine actually depletes electrolytes more quickly and causes dehydration to worsen.

Furthermore, if workers are exposed to direct sunlight, the heat index can actually rise another 15 degrees, making it even more important for them to remain hydrated.

- If you get thirsty, you're already dehydrated – it's important to pay attention to the colour of your urine - **PALE** and clear means you're well hydrated, **If it's DARK, DRINK MORE FLUIDS!** Employees should be urged to evaluate their dehydration level and take action throughout their working day to stay hydrated.

Benefits of staying hydrated are;

- Promotes cardiovascular health
- Keeps your body cool, and your skin supple
- Helps muscles and joints work more effectively, cleansing your body inside and out
- Prevents headache and an uncomfortably dry mouth

How does Dehydration affect your Heart?

Heat-related illnesses are a serious hazard on working sites, especially those where temperatures soar into 90°F with the need for workers to stay hydrated being a constant concern.

Workers are exposed to operational hazards, as many are required to wear personal protection equipment (PPE), with multiple layers of stifling equipment combined with high-heat environments which can create serious situations. Under these circumstances, the risk of dehydration increases dramatically, which can negatively impact workers' ability to maintain focus, posture and operational functionality on the job.

Dehydration causes strain on your heart - the amount of blood circulating through your body, or blood volume, decreases when you are dehydrated. To compensate, your heart beats faster, increasing your heart rate and causing you to feel palpitations. If you are showing signs of dehydration, such as dizziness or weakness **ACTION SHOULD BE TAKEN IMMEDIATELY!**

Notice the Warning Signs!

Employers and on-site managers should be capable of spotting dehydration before it becomes a serious health issue – those most at risk of dehydration are employees who are;

- Working directly under the sun
- Working for hours at a time
- Wearing PPE
- Working with machinery which increases heat

Some of the more prominent warnings that workers are dehydrated are:

- Excessive Fatigue / Tiredness
- Trouble Focussing on the job at hand
- Sunken Eyes
- Rapid Heartbeat
- Dry Mouth and Extreme Thirst
- Darkly Coloured Urine

On the low end of the spectrum, workers should consume 8-12 glasses of water per day, while those who are severely dehydrated should promptly drink an entire large bottle of water to protect against heat stroke.

Useful Questions and Answers

Can an employee leave the workplace if it becomes too hot?

Not unless the employee feels unwell and leads to sick leave. The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 places a legal obligation on employers to provide a “reasonable” working temperature in the office. An employer has a duty to determine what reasonable comfort will be in the particular circumstances.

Are there any other regulations that protect workers during the hot weather?

In addition, The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 requires an employer to make suitable assessment of risks to the health and safety of employees.

The temperature of the workplace is one of the potential hazards that employers should consider when carrying out risk assessments.

Does an employer have to legally provide air conditioning in the OFFICE?

No, they do not. Where working temperatures are uncomfortable, employers should consider any of the following for use in the OFFICE;

- Providing the use of fans or air conditioning units if available
- Providing additional cool water in the workplace and encouraging workers to drink it to prevent dehydration
- Modifying the dress code requirements if this is possible, and acceptable
- However, sensible employers will use mobile air conditioning units and fans to keep workers cool. If an employee has other suggestions for how their employer could make working in the warm weather more comfortable, they should pass these suggestions on to the management for consideration.

Is it acceptable for an employee to wear shorts and flip flops in the office during warm weather?

An employer may change dress code requirements in warmer weather if this is appropriate. However, the employer is still entitled to insist on certain standards of appearance – particularly for customer-facing roles and for shoes and clothing to be sensible for health and safety reasons.

Are there any other regulations that protect workers during hot weather?

The general duties for employers to treat employees with trust and confidence apply throughout the employment relationship. At times of hot weather and uncomfortable working conditions, employers will need to be considerate to employees – after all, if staff are too hot, they won’t be at their most productive.

**For further information contact the
BPIF Health & Safety Team**

**STOP ● THINK II ACT ►
YOUR SAFETY IS OUR PRIORITY**

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