Hot Work – When the Heat is On!



WHAT'S AT STAKE?

When the heat is on, it may be harder to work safely. Excessive heat creates safety risks. Your health is at risk.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

Heat particularly excessive heat creates not only health safety issues but puts your life in danger. The following is an accurate summation.

- It may make you sick, and can even be fatal.
- It can make you short – tempered, inattentive, dizzy and slow – all of which are threats to working safety.
- Sweat can make your hands slippery. It can also run into your eyes or eyewear and obscure your vision.

It doesn't matter whether the heat is created by summer weather or by other working conditions such as hot kitchens or foundries – the results are basically the same. Besides the heat itself, other factors can make you more susceptible to heat stress, including conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, excess weight or poor physical condition. Having to wear gear such as heavy personal protective equipment can also make you a target for heat problems.

Health and safety problems caused by excessive heat are called heat stress. Hyperthermia is another name for the medical condition caused by too much heat. It ranges from heat cramps to heat exhaustion to the most serious state, heat stroke.

- Heat cramps are a warning sign that the body has lost too much salt through sweating. The cramps affect the muscles which have been used for working, such as legs, arms and abdomen, and may also occur when the person is resting. More serious heat stress may follow.
- Heat exhaustion is a warning that the body's heat control mechanism has become overtaxed. Symptoms are exhaustion, dizziness, nausea, pale and clammy skin, rapid pulse and low blood pressure. Heat exhaustion may lead to heat stroke if ignored.
- Heat stroke can be fatal. It happens when the body's heat loss mechanism just shuts down. The person stops sweating and body temperature goes up.

The heart pounds, and the skin is hot and red.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

One can take the following steps to prevent heat illness:

- As much as possible, get used to the heat gradually. When the weather suddenly turns hot, or when you return to working in a hot environment after a vacation, take it easy until you have become accustomed to the heat again.
- Drink water often. The body loses water through perspiration, and you need to replace it frequently. Never drink alcoholic beverages as a fluid replacement because alcohol causes you to lose even more water and salt. This also applies to caffeinated beverages.
- When possible, take frequent rest breaks. Move to a cooler area or change to lighter work periodically when working in a hot environment.
- You may need to replace salt, but get the advice of a medical professional about this, especially if salt intake must be restricted for medical reasons such as high blood pressure or heart problems. Salt tablets are not recommended. Instead, eat lightly salted foods. Start doing this before entering the hot work environment, to give the body a chance to adjust its balance of salt. Special drinks which replace the body’s fluids and minerals are available commercially.
- Dress lightly. Choose fabrics which let moisture and heat escape. Dress in layers so that you can peel off outerwear needed in the cooler morning air as the day progresses. Shade the skin with clothing and wear a hat in the sun. For really hot environments, special suits with cooling components are available.

Watch for heat stress in yourself and your fellow worker – who may not realize what is happening. If signs of heat stress do occur, help the victim cool off by removing him/her to a cool place, fanning or soaking with cool water. Give water to drink if conscious. If you suspect heat stroke, call for medical aid immediately.

FINAL WORD

Remember that heat stoke is a serious medical emergency. It can be fatal!