Know When to Cool It in the Heat



Safety Talk

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Any workplace can be too hot for safety, both outdoors and in hot, humid conditions indoors. Whenever you're exposed to heat, you're at risk of developing heat illness.

WHAT'S THE DANGER

In its mildest form, heat illness causes distraction or lightheadedness, leading to mistakes and injuries. In its most serious form, heat illness can kill.

EXAMPLE

In May 30, 2002, a 30-year-old landscaper collapsed at the end of a day of mowing, weeding, and using a backpack blower. Emergency medical assistance was called, but the victim was pronounced dead at the hospital. His body temperature was 107° F (42°C).

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

It's important to learn the symptoms of heat illness so that you can seek help at the first sign of trouble.

Heat Cramps

The first sign of heat illness may be heat cramps in the shoulders, stomach, calves or thighs. These painful cramps can be relieved by resting in a cool area and drinking water or a sports drink.

Heat Exhaustion

Heat exhaustion is another condition associated with physical labor in hot conditions. People may become dizzy, nauseated, lightheaded, fatigued, faint or develop headaches. Anyone experiencing these symptoms should be taken to a cool area, given fluids and ice packs, or placed in front of a fan. A person who vomits from heat exhaustion may need IV fluid treatment in hospital.

Heat Stroke

Heat stroke is the most serious form of heat illness and it can be deadly. Someone suffering from heat stroke may have warm, flushed skin and no longer be sweating. He or she may act confused or delirious, or have seizures as the body temperature climbs to potentially fatal levels. Victims of heat stroke must be given emergency treatment in hospital. Even with treatment, they might not survive.

How to Avoid Heat Illness

If you perform physically demanding work outdoors during the summer or in hot conditions indoors at any time of year, it's vital that you drink enough fluid, preferably water, to replace the fluid you lose to sweat. If you're sweating heavily, you may require 16 to 32 ounces (473 to 946 milliliters) of water per hour. Since salt is lost through sweat, some people choose to consume sports drinks to replenish it.

Here are some additional ways to avoid heat illness:

1. If the weather suddenly turns hot, give your body time to acclimatize to the heat. It takes a week or two of adjustment to handle heavy work in hot conditions.
2. Wear light-colored and lightweight, loosefitting clothing. But be sure your clothing won't get tangled in moving machinery.
3. Cover your head with a brimmed hat.
4. Don't eat heavy, protein-rich meals. Eat smaller meals.
5. Avoid drinking alcohol or caffeinated beverages, such as coffee, as these actually increase dehydration.
6. Try to save the heaviest work for cooler times of the day.
7. Take periodic rest breaks in shady areas.
8. You likely can't work as quickly as usual in hot conditions. Pace yourself.
9. Be extra careful when working in humid areas. Humidity makes it harder for your body to cool itself through sweating.
10. If you start to feel exhausted, dizzy or nauseated, tell your supervisor immediately.

FINAL WORD

Remember: You're at risk of heat illness anywhere that you're exposed to excessive heat. Watch yourself and your co-workers for signs of heat illness. And stay cool on the job.