Dangers of Heat Stress



Safety Talk

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

When work is underway, it is quite easy to ignore the warning signs of heat stress. We are busy, we have a deadline, stopping to take care of ourselves seems like something we can put off a little longer. However, the heat of the day combined with physical labour, loss of fluids or fatigue can push your body to the point of severe distress. It must work extremely hard to keep your temperature down. If you do not take the proper steps to assist your body in this process, it could lead to heat-related illness, disability and possibly death.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

As your body's temperature rises, it releases heat in several ways: transfer from skin to air, evaporation by perspiration, exhaling hot air or touching a cool object. Drinking water, taking occasional breaks out of the heat, and slowing down are all necessary steps to preventing heat-stress. However, failing to see the signs and taking preventative measures could put you at risk to many hazards.

EXAMPLE

A hay farmer had been raking all day. Temperatures had reached 30 degrees Celsius, and he failed to keep hydrated. Ignoring the early warning signs of heavy sweating, weakness and rapid breathing, his heart raced, sweating ceased, and he fell off the seat and onto the ground in convulsions.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Sometimes, the signs of heat stress go overlooked, or simply ignored, leading to an emergency. Here is what to look out for and the actions you should take in the three stages of heat stress:

- **Body cramps** are a sure sign that you or a coworker need attention. Seek medical aid and move yourself or the coworker to a cooler area, loosen clothing and hydrate with water or nutrient replenishing fluids.
- **Heat exhaustion** can cause heavy sweating, cool, moist skin, body temperature over 38 degrees Celsius (100 degrees Fahrenheit), weak pulse, normal or low blood pressure, lethargy, clumsiness, confusion, extreme thirst, rapid breathing, and blurred vision. Seek immediate medical help. Move yourself or the coworker to a cooler area, loosen clothing, hydrate and fan and spray cool water

on the victim.
- **Heat stroke** occurs when the body reaches a temperature of 41 degrees Celsius (102 degrees Fahrenheit). Signs include weakness, confusion, distress, strange behaviour, skin becomes hot, red, and dry, rapid pulse, headache or dizziness and sweating ceases. If these warning signs are not attended to, the victim could suffer unconsciousness, seizures, or death. If heat stroke is suspected, call an ambulance immediately. While waiting for help to arrive, move yourself or your coworker to a cool area and remove excess clothing, fan and spray cool water over the body and hydrate.

It is important to avoid these conditions. Taking the following measures will prevent heat-related dangers:

- **Drink plenty of water!**
- When temperature and humidity is high, your body must work much harder to keep your body temperature at a safe level. Work with your body by slowing down. This will reduce its workload, allowing it to keep your internal cooling system regulated.
- Watch for headaches, heavy perspiration, high pulse rate and shallow breathing. Move to a cooler location to curb these symptoms.
- Keep an eye on your coworkers, watching for any signs of heat stress.
- Dress appropriately. Wear lightweight, light-coloured and loose-fitting clothing.
- Unless you are on a salt-restricted diet, increase your salt intake to ensure your body has adequate levels.
- Do not shock your body by pushing yourself into long days in the heat. Ease into it with a gradual approach over two or three days.
- Take occasional breaks from the heat by seeking out shade. This will give you a cool space to decrease your body temperature as well as avoid excessive physical stress.
- Protect your skin by covering it with long-sleeved clothing, pants, and a hat.

FINAL WORD

Being mindful of the dangers and the signs of heat stress will keep you and your coworkers safe from its many risks. Try practicing the preventative methods and being an example, share what you know with your coworkers and respect the often-overlooked dangers of working in the heat.