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your rights @ work

Heat Stress

Workers can spend extended periods working in high temperatures, especially during the summer period.

Why is working in the heat bad for your health?

Working in high temperatures can cause heat stress including exhaustion and cramps. This is caused when the body becomes dehydrated and is unable to cool itself enough to maintain a healthy temperature. If left untreated, this can lead to heat stroke, which is a life threatening medical emergency.



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Signs that you might be suffering heat exhaustion

- Clammy skin
- Confusion
- Light-headedness
- Fainting
- Slurred speech
- Nausea
- Rapid pulse
- Vomiting
- Weakness
- Short temper
- Fatigue
- Loss of concentration

Signs that a work mate may have heat stroke

- Staggering walk
- Mental confusion
- Hot skin
- Temperature rise (yet may feel chilled)
- Unconsciousness
- Incoherent
- Delirious
- Convulsions

Is there an upper temperature limit at which we should stop work?

Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act, your employer has a legal duty to “ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of all his/her employees”. If workers are suffering from any of the above symptoms, then it is clear that your employer is not complying with the law. But the law does not state any precise temperature at which workers should stop work, or any specific actions which must be taken by the employer at certain temperatures.



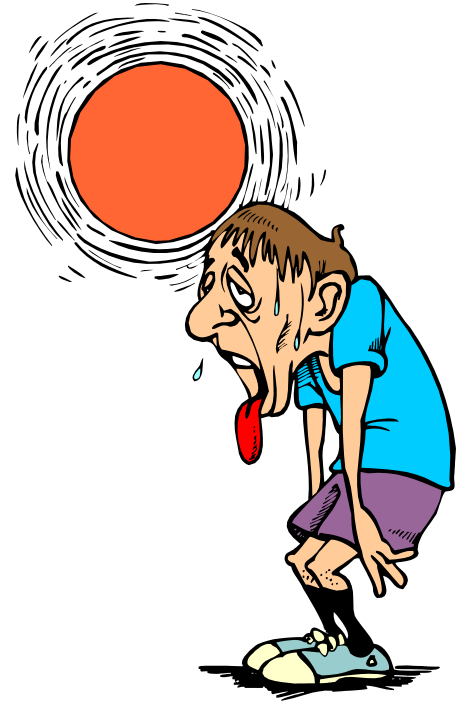
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What helps to prevent Heat Stress?

It is obviously more difficult for the employer to “control” the environment if you’re working outdoors than if you are working indoors. However, if the work has to be done outdoors then employers must be responsible in taking steps that are available to protect workers. These include:

- Providing canopies or awnings over sections of the outdoor area where work is carried out, to shield workers from the ultra-violet rays of the sun, as well as from the direct heat of the sun.
- Provide regular rest breaks. A ten minute break every hour, in a cooler area, helps the body to cool off.
- Provide air-conditioned sheds or vehicles for rest breaks. These must obviously be near each area where work is being done, or your break time will be spent walking to and from the shed/vehicle.
- Provision of cold (non-alcoholic) drinks. Frequent small drinks of cooled water will help replace water lost from your body through sweat, before dehydration begins.



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What to do?

- Ask workers exposed to high temperatures if they find conditions too hot or have any heat stress symptoms.
- Ask management to measure and record the temperature regularly throughout the year, with instruments that measure dry temperature and humidity.
- Negotiate exposure reduction by frequent rests away from the source of heat and job rotation.
- Request suitable clothing and footwear be provided by the employer – clothing which increases body heat or prevent sweat evaporating is not suitable (e.g. nylon)
- Arrange for regular medical checks of employees, particularly for blood pressure.
- Request information and training for all employees on the need for adequate water, recognition of heat symptoms, acclimatisation to heat, exposure build up for new workers after holidays, and types of work which increases heat hazard.
- Ensure that first aid people are trained in recognition of heat symptoms and first aid treatment for heat stress.

For more information, please contact your Union Organiser / Delegate or your Member Service Centre on 9427 7777 or 1800 064 657.

