

# Keeping Cool when the Heat is On

Hot and extreme heat conditions can increase the risk of individuals facing health problems. These can be specific heat-related illnesses or a worsening of existing medical problems.

Anyone can suffer from heat stress, but those most at risk are:

- People over 65 years, particularly those living alone or without air conditioning
- Babies and young children
- Pregnant and nursing mothers
- People who have existing medical conditions, especially with heart disease, high blood pressure or lung disease
- People on medications for mental illness.

The risk is greatest during heat waves and when the temperature hovers about 5°C or more above average for three or more days. This risk is increased when high temperatures are combined with increased humidity. Environmental conditions (such as low air movement, high humidity levels and air temperature) are non-modifiable factors when it comes to the risk of heat stress.

Modifiable factors that contribute to heat related illness at work include:

- Inadequate cooling off or rest periods
- Insufficient water consumption
- Inappropriate clothing for conditions
- Individual factors that cause dehydration (such as poor diet, vomiting, diarrhea or alcohol and caffeine consumption)
- Individual medical conditions that may cause heat stress (such as heart problems, diabetes or hypertension)
- Individual medication that may affect the body's temperature regulation
- An individual's age, general physical fitness and weight.

Heat related illness can occur when the body is unable to cool itself adequately. The body normally cools itself by sweating. In some situations, sweating isn't enough and body temperature rises. This can be associated with different effects ranging from a mild heat rash or cramps through to heat exhaustion or the more severe and potentially fatal heat stroke.

## Heat Rash

Heat rash or 'prickly heat' is a skin irritation caused by excessive sweating during hot, humid weather. It can occur at any age, but is most common in young children. Heat rash looks like a cluster of red pimples or small blisters.

It is more likely to occur on the neck and upper chest, or increases in the groin, elbow or under the breasts. The best treatment for heat rash is to move to a cooler, less humid environment. Keep the affected area dry. Dusting powder may be used to increase comfort. Avoid using ointments or creams as they keep the skin warm and moist, which may make the condition worse.

## Heat Cramps

Heat cramps usually affect people who have sweated a lot during strenuous activity. Sweating depletes the body's salt and fluid, which can lead on to muscle cramps. These painful cramps usually affect the abdomen, arms or legs.

Cramps may be an early symptom of the more severe condition of heat exhaustion. Stop all strenuous activity and rest quietly in a cool place. Increase fluid intake using cool water, clear juice or a low sugar sports drink.

Do not return to strenuous activity until the cramps subside. Seek medical attention if the cramps continue for more than one hour.



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## Heat Exhaustion

Heat exhaustion can develop over several days of extreme hot weather. It is the body's response to gradual depletion of fluid and salt due to sweating. Those most prone to heat exhaustion are people exercising or working in a hot environment, or people with high blood pressure, heart or circulation problems.

Warning signs include heavy sweating, paleness, muscle cramps, tiredness and weakness, dizziness, headache, nausea or vomiting, or fainting. Workers with these signs and symptoms need to seek immediate medical attention.

In the meantime:

- Attempt to cool the person with a cool shower, bath or sponge.
- The person should rest in a cool place. If possible, move the person to an air-conditioned environment.
- Give cool fluids. Avoid high sugar drinks.
- Ensure they are wearing loose, lightweight clothing.

## Heat Stroke

Heat stroke is the most serious heat-related illness. It can be fatal. It develops when the body loses its ability to sweat and is unable to cool down. Body temperature rises to 41°C or higher. This can occur rapidly over a period of just 10-15 minutes.

Warning signs include extremely high body temperature (above 39°C); red, hot, dry skin, although in some cases some sweating may still be evident; rapid pulse; throbbing headache; dizziness and nausea. If heat stroke is suspected, seek medical help immediately, as this is a life threatening emergency.

The body temperature must be reduced quickly. Move the person to a cool shaded area. Remove excess clothing. Immerse the person in a tub of cool water, ensuring more than just the extremities are cooled.

Alternatively, place the person in a cool shower, spray with cool water from a hose or wrap the person in a cool, wet sheet and fan vigorously. Monitor the body temperature and continue cooling efforts until the body temperature drops below 38°C. Do not give the person fluids to drink unless you are confident they can swallow properly. If unconscious, place the person on their side and clear the airway.

## Prevention is best

- Drink plenty of fluids during hot weather - cool water is best
- Don't wait until you are thirsty to drink - drink regularly during the whole day
- Urine colour is a good indication to hydration status - it should be clear to light straw-coloured, not dark or golden
- Increase natural ventilation by opening windows and using fans
- Seek an air-conditioned environment to rest if possible
- Monitor those at high risk
- Seek your doctor's advice about predisposing medical conditions and medications
- Pace yourself and limit strenuous outdoor activity during peak hot periods (i.e. midday)
- Stay out of the sun
- Take a cool shower or bath
- Take time to adjust to the environment
- Avoid alcohol, coffee and other caffeinated drinks, and high sugar drinks



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