



Working in the heat

Tuesday February 12, 2019

Your health and safety is a key priority for your Union. With summer upon us and extreme temperatures predicted there is never a better time than now to focus on methods to reduce risks and manage symptoms of working in the heat.

The following is provided as a guide for members' information. If you require specific advice on your individual circumstances, please contact the branch on (08) 8443 7389 for assistance from your Official.

Working in the heat presents particular health and safety hazards. It can result in a number of adverse health effects – ranging from discomfort to serious illness.

Just how working in heat affects the body is influenced by a number of risk factors. These include:

- Air temperature, air movement and humidity
- Level of work activity including the number of hours worked
- Clothing worn especially essential protective clothing
- Level of fluid loss and replacement affecting water and salt balance
- Sources of radiant heat (engines, heat from the bitumen)
- Acclimatisation (Important: people generally do not acclimatise to changeable seasonal heat)
- Personal factors – use of certain medications and/or pre-existing medical conditions (e.g. heart, circulatory, kidney or skin disease, diabetics and asthmatics), and being overweight.

When the body produces energy by physical exertion and/or receives energy from an external heat source - body temperature will start to rise. To counter the rise in body temperature, the body's cooling mechanisms automatically come into play – i.e. perspiration and dilation of the blood vessels and increased flow to the surface of the skin.

If due to environmental conditions and/or the level of physical activity, these cooling mechanisms are unable to prevent body temperature from rising, and/or excessive fluid loss results in dehydration, the following risks to health and safety will occur.

HEAT ILLNESS

- Skin rashes or “prickly heat” often over the arms, shoulders, chest, in body creases and behind the knees.
- Dehydration. Feeling thirsty indicates that dehydration is already occurring.
- Heat cramps are muscle spasms indicating an imbalance of salt and water in the body, caused by perspiration and/or inadequate fluid replacement.
- Heat exhaustion characterized by clammy, moist skin, weakness and fatigue, nausea, vomiting, headache, giddiness and possibly fainting due to the dilation of blood vessels and pooling of the blood in the lower limbs.
- Heat stroke is a serious condition with rapid onset. It is characterised by hot, dry skin and a rapidly rising body temperature. **Heat stroke can result in collapse, loss of consciousness, convulsions and death.**

SYMPTOMS OF HEAT ILLNESS MUST NEVER BE IGNORED

Symptoms usually disappear rapidly while resting in a cool, well-ventilated area and drinking ample non-alcoholic and non-aerated fluids (e.g. cool water). Tea & coffee are not recommended.

Arrangements for working in the heat

- Loose-fitting light coloured clothes are preferred.
- You are encouraged to drink fluids before, during and after working in the heat in order to prevent dehydration e.g. a cup of water every 15 to 20 minutes is recommended.
- Changing your hours of work to reschedule harder physical work to a cooler part of the day.
- **Rest breaks (preferably in a cool and shaded place) should be taken. Australia Post managers will usually add 5 minutes an hour once temperatures climb to 30 degrees. It is important to note that most OH&S guides recommend longer than this. If heat exhaustion symptoms are experienced it is important to stop work, go to a cool area, have a cool drink, receive first aid treatment if required and you should not resume work until you are recovered. If you have heat exhaustion seek assistance because your judgment may be impaired.**

SOLAR (UV) PROTECTION

Australia has the highest incidence of skin cancer in the world. Two out of every three Australians will require treatment in their lifetime for various forms of skin cancer. Hats, sunglasses and clothing are important to wear for protection against solar UV radiation.

Any remaining exposed skin should be protected by the use of a sunscreen of preferably SPF 30+. In practice the amount of sunscreen applied and the evenness of the coverage can have a significant effect on the duration of protection.

Sunscreen is best applied to clean, dry skin. It should be applied 20 minutes before going outside and reapplied every 2 hours to maintain the stated protection.

Yours faithfully,



Nick Townsend
Branch Secretary