

Take Precautions to Prevent Heat Illness

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Heat illness is a silent hazard. Heat illness victims may not realize they're in trouble until the symptoms are advanced. If left unattended, heat illness could lead to heat stroke, a condition that is life-threatening. Construction worker employers should be familiar with Cal/OSHA's heat illness prevention regulation to prevent possible heat-related illness or death. The main points of the regulation include training, water, shade and planning.

Training - Workers and supervisors should be trained in both environmental (working conditions that create the possibility of heat illness) and personal (individual's age, degree of acclimatization, health, etc.) risk factors, how to recognize the early warning signs of heat illness in themselves and in fellow workers, and in first aid measures. Training should include how to prevent heat illnesses, the importance of drinking water, how to slowly build up heat tolerance, and what emergency medical services to call to prevent a delay in life-saving services. When workers cannot communicate directly with emergency services, the employer must identify someone who can.

Water - For an 8 hour work shift, employers are required to make 2 gallons of water per employee available. Not all of the water needs to be available at once, but the water supply should allow at least one quart per employee at all times. Workers should consume about 3 - 4 cups of water every hour (about one cup every 20 minutes) starting at the beginning of the work shift and throughout the day. Alcohol, coffee, tea, and caffeinated soft drinks, which cause dehydration, should be avoided.

Shade - Employers are required to provide workers with a shaded rest area that has good air movement. The area can include buildings, canopies, lean-tos, or even shade trees; a car or other vehicle interiors can be used if shaded, air conditioned, or kept cool in some other way. However, the rest area should not be hazardous (e.g. not underneath tractors or in confined spaces). Employers must allow workers to take periodic rest breaks (when they request it) in a cool or shaded area. The rest area should have enough room to allow workers to rest and sit comfortably. A rest break in the shade for at least five minutes can reduce potential heat illness.

Planning - Employers need to develop and implement written procedures for complying with the heat illness prevention standard. This should consist of responding to symptoms of possible heat illness, including how emergency medical services will be provided should they become necessary; contacting emergency medical services, and if necessary, for transporting employees to a point where they can be reached by an emergency medical service provider; and ensuring that, in the event of an emergency, clear and precise directions to the work site can and will be provided as needed to emergency responders.

Most heat-related health problems can be prevented, or the risk of developing them reduced, if a few basic precautions are taken. Encourage workers to:

- * Eat wisely. Hot, heavy meals add heat to the body and divert blood to the digestive system, so eat lightly.
- * Dress appropriately. Wear lightweight, light-colored, loose fitting clothing, plus a hard hat. Not only do hard hats protect against falling objects, but they also shield against the sun's rays.
- * Use, and reapply, sunscreen.
- * Keep out of the direct sun whenever possible.

Summertime work will be more enjoyable and productive if every worker on site is trained to recognize the signs and symptoms of heat illness and to know how to prevent, control, and respond to its effects. □