

HEAT STRESS INJURIES

Summer brings risky outdoor activities ranging from fireworks to construction work, the most common risk being hot temperatures and longer daylight hours. Overheating is possible when the temperature is high and/or someone has not drunk enough water or fluids. Fatigue, high humidity, no air movement, physical activity, and thick clothing can contribute to heat stress as well. Each year, over forty people die due to heat stress related injury and almost 3,500 injuries are reported.

What is heat stroke?

Heat stroke is a medical emergency. The primary signs and symptoms of heat stroke are confusion; irrational behavior; loss of consciousness; convulsions; a lack of sweating (usually); hot, dry skin; and an abnormally high body temperature. If a worker shows signs of possible heat stroke, professional medical treatment should be obtained immediately. Place the worker in a shaded area, remove outer clothing, wet the skin, and increase air movement to improve evaporative cooling until professional methods of cooling are initiated and the seriousness of the condition can be assessed. Fluids should be replaced as soon as possible. The medical outcome of an episode of heat stroke depends on the victim's physical fitness and the timing and effectiveness of first aid treatment.

What is heat exhaustion?

The signs and symptoms of heat exhaustion are headache, nausea, vertigo, weakness, thirst, and giddiness. Fortunately, this condition responds readily to prompt treatment. Fainting associated with heat exhaustion can be dangerous because the victim may be operating machinery or controlling an operation that should not be left unattended. If you or someone around you experiences symptoms of heat exhaustion, immediately lie down and elevate feet slightly. Shade the person from direct sunlight and apply cool wet cloths to forehead. If the person starts to vomit, seek medical treatment.

What are heat cramps?

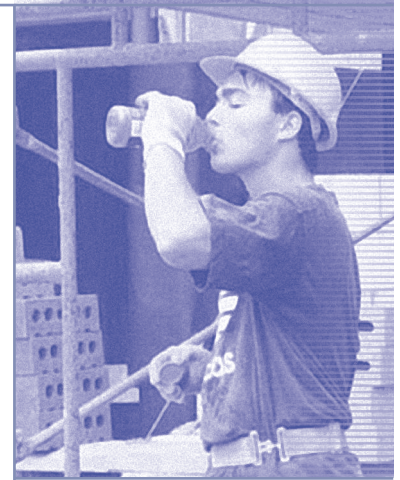
Heat cramps are painful spasms of the muscles, which occur when workers drink large quantities of water but fail to replace their bodies' salt loss. Tired muscles are usually the ones most susceptible to cramps. Cramps may occur during or after working hours and may be relieved by taking liquids such as sports drinks by mouth or saline solutions intravenously for quicker relief if medically determined to be required.

What is heat rash?

Heat rash, also known as prickly heat, may occur in hot and humid environments where sweat is not easily removed from the surface of the skin by evaporation. When extensive or complicated by infection, heat rash can be so uncomfortable that it inhibits sleep and impedes a worker's performance or even results in temporary total disability. Resting in a cool place and allowing the skin to dry can help prevent it.

So how can we prevent overheating? When possible, limit outdoor activities. Work early in the morning and increase the duration of rest breaks. Wear a hat and use sunscreen. Wear light colored and loose fitting clothing. Drink plenty of water to replenish body fluids lost through perspiration. Drink fluids before, during, and after any physical activities. Preventing heat stress is a matter of controlling the factors that cause it.

For more information about heat stress injuries and illnesses, visit www.osha.gov



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