

Employee Safety

Stay Cool When Working in the Heat

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June is National Safety Month, which is a great time to plan to ensure employee safety on the job. As you can imagine, heat is one of the biggest safety concerns during the summertime. Working in excessive heat can be more than uncomfortable – it can be dangerous to worker health and safety. **According to OSHA**, thousands of people are affected by heat-related illnesses each year and, given that heat-related issues are preventable, any death is unacceptable.

California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health – also known as Cal/OSHA – has led the charge on developing more stringent regulations to protect employees working outdoors in the heat. This is outlined in **Cal/OSHA's rules, Title 8 Section 3395 – Heat Illness Prevention**. Overall, this regulation requires California employers in agriculture, construction, landscaping and any other industry with outdoor workers to provide more than adequate water, shade, rest breaks and training. This rule applies when temperatures exceed 80° F. Additional rest-recovery requirements go into effect when outdoor temperatures top 95° F.

So, what do you need to know and what should you do for your employees to keep them safe?

First, it's important to understand how the body handles heat and hot conditions. As temperatures rise, the body releases heat more slowly. As humidity increases, sweat evaporation decreases and stagnant air makes sweat evaporation more difficult. When these three factors combine, you have a higher potential for health and safety concerns.

Second, as stated in section (b) in Title 8, acclimatization is key. You must build in time for employees to adapt to the heat. "Acclimatization means temporary adaptation of the body to work in the heat that occurs gradually when a person is exposed to it. Acclimatization peaks in most people within four to 14 days of regular work for at least two hours per day in the heat."

Third, beyond personal health risks, it's important to note that you're putting workers at risk when they're not properly prepared for the heat. The chances of incidents resulting because of sweaty hands, dizziness and decreased mental alertness increase considerably in hot conditions. Additionally, increased body temperature and discomfort can lead to irritability and frustration, which could lead to more careless behavior.

OSHA recommends employers train workers on the signs of heat illness and help workers to follow these tips:

Water: You need plenty of water throughout the day – every 15 minutes. Don't wait until you feel thirsty.

Rest: Rest breaks are needed to help your body recover.

Shade: Resting in the shade or in a cooled space helps you cool down more efficiently.

The best plan is to be proactive. Employers should explore portable cooling solutions to aid in keeping workers safe and productive on the job where heat is a factor. From portable evaporative coolers to cooling neckties, practical options are available to aid heat illness prevention.

Previously featured on Safety+Health Magazine's site.

Please visit MSCDirect.com for products from PortaCool that will help with heat stress in your facility.

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