

## Summer's Silent Threat: Heat-Related Illness

Are you or a co-worker experiencing a silent heat attack? Do you know that a worker suffering from headaches, dizziness, fainting, weakness & wet skin, excessive thirst, nausea, heavy sweating, irritability, or confusion may be signs of heat-related stress or illness? Because the exposure is so vast in our industry, everyone should know the signs and understand the facts of heat-related illnesses. The combination of heat and humidity can be a serious health threat, especially during late spring, summer, and early fall months. If you perform heavy work outside in direct sunlight, for example on a lumber yard or a construction site, or in a hot building with little to no air flow, you may be at increased risk for a heat-related illness. Each summer, the LBM industry experiences some reduction in productivity and in some cases, hospitalization of workers, due to a heat-related illness. Below are precautionary measures to prevent heat-related illnesses.

- Drink small amounts of water frequently, at least a pint (16 oz.) every hour;
- Wear light-colored, loose-fitting, breathable clothing— cotton is good;
- Take frequent short breaks in cool shaded areas, but not under heavy equipment;
- Eat smaller meals before and during work activity;
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol or large amounts of sugar- especially tea, coffee, or energy drinks that have high caffeine and sugar content;
- Work in the shade as much as possible, using fans or natural air to stay cool;
- Talk to your personal doctor/nurse and read the precautions of your medications (over-the-counter and prescription) to see if heat exposure causes complications; and,
- Evaluate your PPE equipment; respirators and protective work suits can increase heat stress. [Special Note: Hard hats should not be altered (do not drill holes) to attempt heat reduction. Modifying a hard hat reduces the protection of the head. See your supervisor for additional advice.]

**There are three kinds of serious heat-related illnesses: heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke.**

All workers and supervisors need to know how to recognize each illness and what first aid treatment is necessary. Here is a brief overview:

1. **Heat Cramps are muscle pains usually caused by physical labor in a hot work environment.** Heat cramps are normally the first signs of a heat illness. The cramps are caused by the loss of body salts and fluid during sweating. At the first signs of muscle cramps, workers should replace fluid loss by drinking water and having a snack, and/or carbohydrate electrolyte replacement liquids (e.g., sports drinks) every 15 to 20 minutes. Workers should avoid salt tablets. Seek medical help if the worker has a history of heart problems, is on a low sodium diet, or if the cramps do not subside within one hour.
2. **Heat Exhaustion is the next most serious heat-related health problem.** Symptoms of heat exhaustion include: headaches, nausea, dizziness, weakness, irritability, thirst, heavy sweating, elevated body temperature, and/or decreased urine output. If a worker shows signs or symptoms of possible heat exhaustion, the worker should be removed from the hot area, given liquids to drink, and cooled down. Unnecessary clothing including shoes and socks should be

removed. Encourage frequent sips of cool water. If the worker is unable to drink, get emergency medical help immediately. The worker should be cooled with cold compresses to the head, neck, and face or have the worker wash his or her head, face and neck with cold water. As a precaution, the worker should be taken to a company-authorized medical clinic or emergency room for medical evaluation and treatment. Make sure someone stays with the worker until medical help arrives if 911 is called.

3. **Heat Stroke is the most serious heat-related health problem.** Heat stroke occurs when the body's temperature regulating system (our cooling system) fails and body temperature rises to critical levels. Heat stroke is a life-threatening medical emergency that may rapidly result in death! Symptoms of heat stroke include: confusion, loss of consciousness, seizures, very high body temperature, hot dry skin or profuse sweating. If a worker shows signs of possible heat stroke, administer first aid as identified above. Next, have someone call 911 and get emergency medical help immediately.

Be proactive when it comes to heat-related illnesses. Drink water frequently, work in the shade as much as possible, take short breaks frequently, wear light-colored, loose, cotton clothing, and, keep an eye on your co-workers. Notify your co-worker and a supervisor immediately when you recognize any heat-related symptoms or illnesses.