



Health and safety in a heat wave

Most of us welcome warm weather and sunshine, but when it's too hot for too long, summer sunshine can cause ill health and potentially dangerous conditions, whether you work indoors or outside.

What the law says

The legislation is quite vague about working temperatures. Although the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 requires employers to provide their staff with, among other things, a safe and healthy working environment and safe systems of work, temperature isn't mentioned.

The Workplace Health, Safety and Welfare Regulations 1992 state that the workplace must be maintained at a reasonable temperature. A minimum temperature of 16°C is stated, but not a maximum temperature. Drinking water must be provided and there must also be adequate ventilation, both of which help to manage a hot working environment.

How heat can affect work

On a hot summer's day it is not unusual for temperatures in the workplace to exceed 25°C. The atmosphere can become heavy, and make staff sleepy and less aware of the dangers. There is an increased risk of accidents due to slips and trips, falls, and injury caused by lethargy through poor manual handling or poor judgement when using hand tools. The effects of heat can also lead to poor decision making with resultant errors.

Heat exhaustion can affect some people in sedentary, as well as manual work. Inadequate intake of fluids to replace fluid lost through sweating can give rise to nausea, light-headedness and general weakness. If untreated it can lead to fainting and possibly heat stroke.

Heat stroke is a life threatening condition where the body loses the ability to control its own temperature. It can arise from untreated heat exhaustion or high humidity. In very humid conditions sweat can't evaporate from the skin and the body is unable to cool down.

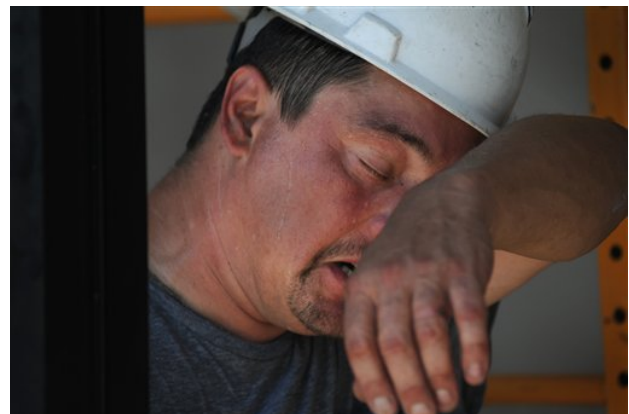
Who is at highest risk?

The people who are at highest risk are those who are unable to easily control their working environment. Good risk assessments are essential to reduce the temperature in the work place during hot spells.

The following list of people are at a higher risk of injury in hot weather and hot environments:

- Kitchen staff
- Manufacturing workers
- Processing plants
- Maintenance staff
- Construction workers
- Gardeners
- People wearing personal protective equipment, e.g. breathing apparatus, impermeable protective clothing, etc.
- Drivers

Buildings with poor insulation properties and poor ventilation can create problems for people, even for those working in sedentary roles.



What can employers do?

The best precaution is to avoid exposure to the hot environment, and if that isn't reasonably practicable, to reduce exposure to the minimum necessary to achieve the task.

- Can the job be done at a cooler time of day?
- Provide frequent breaks in a cool environment away from the sun and sources of heat such as cooking equipment and other heating processes. The hotter the environment and/or more strenuous the work the more frequent and /or longer the breaks should be.

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- Can the working environment be modified e.g. air conditioning, humidifiers/dehumidifiers. Air movement alone e.g. fans, may not provide adequate cooling if the external air is at a high temperature.
- If the working environment cannot be modified then 'refuges' should be provided where breaks can be taken, e.g. provision of shaded areas, an air cooled/conditioned rest room.
- Can processes that generate heat be enclosed or shielded.
- PPE designed for work in hot environments should be selected. E.g. light colours and loose fitting, absorbent, good wicking properties, etc.
- Drinking water supply must be provided. Anyone carrying out manual work in a hot environment should drink 8 pints per day and a further pint for every hour worked.
- Drivers should be able to pace their journeys – travel early or late, to avoid the heat of the day, take regular breaks and park in the shade.

What can staff do?

- Drink plenty of fluids, but avoid drinks that contain alcohol, caffeine and lots of sugar.
- Eat more frequently, but make sure meals are balanced and light.
- If you take medication, check with the doctor about the effects of sun and heat exposure.
- Cover car windows and steering wheels to reduce heat.
- Wear sun block and light coloured, loose fitting clothes when outside.
- At the first signs of heat exhaustion, move to a cooler location, rest for a few minutes and sip a cool drink. Seek medical attention if the condition doesn't improve.
- Avoid sunburn: it slows the skin's ability to cool itself.
- Avoid extremes of temperature change. A cool shower after coming in from hot temperature can cause hypothermia.

Note:

Whilst this fact sheet gives general guidance on the law relating to this topic at the time of drafting, it is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to this area of law. You are advised to seek specific advice in relation to any particular issues that need to be addressed in relation to this topic by a competent person.

