



Loss Control Insights

Heat Related Illnesses Can Be Fatal

Working in an excessively hot environment can be difficult -- and even fatal. Heat can create a number of safety problems and illnesses, including heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke, which can be fatal. These illnesses caused by too much heat are called hyperthermia.

Heat can also cause you to become inattentive, short-tempered, dizzy and slow. All of these conditions can cause you to work in an unsafe manner.

Hot conditions can be caused by the weather or by the work situation itself, such as a laundry-room or a foundry. When the atmosphere is humid, the effects of the heat are compounded.

Here are the warning signals of heat illness:

Heat cramps affects muscles such as those in the arms, legs and abdomen – the muscles which have been used while working. These cramps may occur after work, when the person is resting. Heat cramps are a signal that the body has lost too much salt through sweating.

Heat exhaustion may have these symptoms: A feeling of exhaustion, nausea, dizziness, pale and clammy skin, quick pulse and low blood pressure. Heat exhaustion is also a warning that the mechanism which controls heat for the body has become seriously overtaxed. Heat stroke may follow if heat exhaustion is not treated.

Heat stroke is a serious matter and it can be fatal. It occurs when the body's heat control mechanism simply shuts down. Perspiration stops and the body temperature rises. The heart pounds and the skin becomes flushed and hot. This condition is a medical emergency and must be treated immediately.

Here are some tips for preventing heat illness:

- Get used to working in the heat gradually. For example, if the weather suddenly turns hot or you are transferred to a hot environment, take it easy until you are accustomed to the temperature.
- Drink water often to avoid dehydration. The body loses water through perspiration, so you need to replenish it frequently. Do not drink alcoholic beverages or caffeinated beverages because they will cause you to lose even more water and salt.
- Take frequent rest breaks when working in hot conditions. These breaks can consist of moving to a cooler area or switching to lighter work for awhile.
- Get a physician's advice before replacing salt, particularly if your salt intake is restricted for medical reasons such as circulatory problems. The use of salt tablets is not recommended. Eating lightly salted food – before entering the work environment – may be a better idea. Also available are special drinks which are intended to replace the body's fluid and mineral levels.
- Dress lightly, in layers so that you can subtract or add clothing as the temperature changes. Be sure to shade the skin against the sun.

It is important that you remain alert to the signs of heat illness in yourself and in your co-workers. If signs of heat illness develop, move the victim to a cool place and cool him off by fanning or soaking him with cool water. If he is conscious, give him water to drink. If you have any reason to suspect that the person may be suffering from heat stroke, call for medical help immediately.