

Heat Stress

As we enter the summer season, this is a perfect time to remember the risks of heat stress and the protective measures necessary for working outdoors during hot, humid, and sunny weather, or in indoor work areas such as steam vaults, utility tunnels, and mechanical rooms.

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), dozens of workers die, and thousands become ill due to heat stress each year. For this reason, Northwestern developed a [Heat Illness Prevention](#) program to protect you and your colleagues from heat stress-related illnesses, such as those listed below.

Heat stroke occurs when the body can no longer regulate its temperature and is indicated by hot, dry skin or profuse sweating, confusion, and fainting.

Heat rash is skin irritation caused by excessive sweating.

Heat exhaustion is the body's response to an excessive loss of water and salt and is indicated by headache, nausea, dizziness, and weakness.

Heat cramps are muscle cramps caused by low salt levels.

Know your risk

The number on the thermometer is not the only factor that determines whether you are at risk of heat stress. Be aware of the many factors that impact your risk of heat stress, including:

- Environmental conditions, such as humidity, sunlight, wind, and the presence of hot equipment
- The level of physical activity needed to perform the work (e.g., heavy lifting or pulling)
- Clothing and personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Individual risk factors, including dehydration, health problems, some medications, and pregnancy)

Tips for Success When Talking to Your Team

Preparation is Key: Keep the topic relevant to your work. Work with your team to review potential heat stress hazards in your area and discuss the required safety measures when working in hot areas.

Stay Positive: Keep the focus on what can be done to create a safe workplace instead of focusing on what has gone wrong in the past.

Share a Story, Ask for a Story: Storytelling is a powerful method to convey information. Stories from your employees make the topic even more relatable.

Stay cool

When the heat index (i.e., how hot it feels based on air temperature and humidity) is above 80° Fahrenheit (F), the potential for heat stress exists. Follow these guidelines to stay safe:

- ✓ Factor weather conditions into your job planning. Use the OSHA Heat Safety [Tool](#) to check the current heat index and preventative measures.
- ✓ Take frequent breaks in shaded, cool areas.
- ✓ Drink plenty of water and avoid caffeinated beverages to stay hydrated.
- ✓ When possible, wear light or loose-fitting clothing to promote air circulation on the skin.

Did you know? Direct sunlight can increase the heat index by up to 15°F!

Responding to heat stress

If you or one of your coworkers is experiencing signs or symptoms of heat stress, notify your supervisor immediately and do the following:

- Move to a well-ventilated, cool, and shaded area.
- Drink cool water.
- Remove or loosen outer clothing, if possible.
- Cool down using ice packs or cool compresses on the head, neck, armpits, or groin.
- If the condition is serious (e.g., fainting, seizures, confusion), call 911 immediately.

Learn more: Review the OSHA Heat Index [Guidelines](#), and complete Heat Stress in the Workplace [training](#).

Report all injuries: [Online](#) or call (847) 491-5582.

Safety at Home

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), an average of 9,235 hospitalizations and 702 deaths occur due to heat exposure each year in the U.S. To keep you and your friends, family, and neighbors safe this summer:

- ✓ Ensure your building's air conditioning is in good condition, or locate nearby cooling centers.
- ✓ Regularly check on vulnerable individuals (e.g., elderly) during heat advisories and warnings.
- ✓ Never leave children or pets in hot cars, as temperatures can become dangerous quickly.

For Additional Information Contact Environmental Health and Safety at ehs@northwestern.edu.

Do you or your team have a safety story you'd like to share? Contact Environmental Health and Safety for details.