



Heat Sickness Considerations

Prolonged or strenuous activity in hot environments can cause a range of ailments from discomfort to death. It's essential that staff members understand the risks and how to protect against them. The two most serious forms of heat-related illnesses are heat exhaustion (primarily from dehydration) and heat stroke, which can be fatal. People who exhibit signs of heat exhaustion or heat stroke need immediate attention. Here are possible heat-related health hazards, along with how to avoid them, how to recognize them and how to cope with them if they occur; all from the Centers for Disease Control.

Heat rash: More a discomfort rather than dangerous, heat rash is a sign that the temperature is affecting someone. The rash can be an undesirable distraction. Lightweight, loose-fitting clothing is least likely to cause this irritation.

Heat stress: High temperatures, especially in combination with strenuous activity, can result in thirst, tiredness, dizziness and even difficulty seeing. Such symptoms suggest that it's time to take a break—out of the sun—and drink some cool water or fruit juice. This action should prevent fainting.

Heat cramps: These painful muscle spasms in arms, legs or intestines are caused by losing salt while sweating. Cooling down and drinking juice is the remedy. Help prevent recurrences by making sure the summer diet includes foods that replace lost salt.

Heat exhaustion: Heat exhaustion is a common response to strenuous activity in the heat. It is characterized by weakness, dizziness and/or nausea. Victims may have chills, with clammy skin and profuse sweating. The treatment is to rest in a cool spot—preferably with the feet slightly elevated—and drink liquids. Because heat exhaustion is a more serious problem than heat stress, anyone so affected should increase their rest and reduce the pace of activity for a few days.

Heatstroke: This most serious type of heat sickness is life threatening, so great care should be taken that the effects of heat never reach this stage. The victim's perspiration and its cooling action stop, skin may be hot to the touch, and poor coordination and confused behavior may be evident, possibly followed by collapse. The American Red Cross recommends the proper response is to put the victim in a cool place and call 911 immediately. While awaiting medical assistance, sponge the victim with cold water, apply ice packs or cold drink cans, or immerse the victim in cold water. Continue these efforts until help arrives. Drinking water may be offered if the victim is conscious. Hospitalization may be required; extended rest will certainly be needed. It's important that those who undergo strenuous activity in high temperatures be aware of the symptoms of heat illness and how to respond to them. It is similarly important that they understand how various factors such as appropriate clothing, diet and rest may prevent such illness. Supervisors should try to avoid scheduling heavy work on hot days or at the hottest period of the day, and must make sure ample periods of rest are provided in a location protected from direct sun. Advice should be provided about what to wear, the use of sunscreen and avoiding dehydration.