

Working In Hot Environments

What Workers Need to Know

A USW Factsheet - June 2003



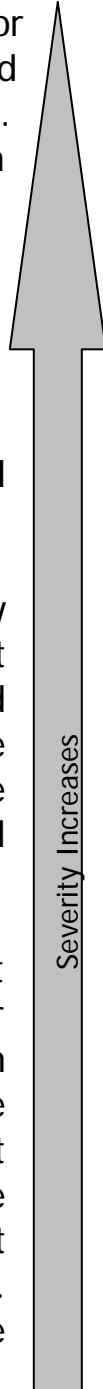
Background

Heat is a health and safety concern for many workplaces where United Steelworkers of America members work. In some workplaces this is a problem year round; in others this is a problem during hot months. Not only does heat cause workers to be uncomfortable, but it also causes health and safety problems.

How does heat affect my health and safety?

Our bodies adjust to heat very effectively through a complex internal process that includes regulating blood flow and producing perspiration. When the temperature and humidity change, the body reacts to keep its internal temperature in check.

However, our body's reaction to heat can result in slipperiness from sweat or dizziness. Also, hot environments can cause burns or safety glasses to be fogged. Some sources suggest that work related injuries occur more frequently in hot environments. Heat can also cause a variety of illnesses. These illnesses are summarized on the right side of this page.



Heat Stroke

Heat stroke is the most serious of heat related health problems. This can occur when the body stops adjusting to the hot temperature and sweating can't keep up with the heat.

Heat stroke is characterized by hot, dry, red skin that is warm or hot to the touch. Medical attention is needed immediately!

Heat Exhaustion

Heat exhaustion is caused by the loss of large amounts of fluid from the body. A worker with heat exhaustion continues to sweat, but their body can't keep up with the heat.

The worker may have a headache, be fatigued, or have flu like symptoms. In most cases the worker needs to rest, cool down, and drink plenty of liquids.

Heat Cramps

Workers may suffer from cramps and painful muscle spasms. This is typically a result when workers drink water to replace the fluids they lose from sweating, but don't replace the body's loss of salt.

Heat Rash

Workers may experience heat rash or prickly heat from working in hot, humid environments. When sweat is not easily removed from the surface of the body and skin remains moist, sweat glands may become clogged and a rash can appear.

How can we address heat in our workplace?

Exposure to heat hazards is not regulated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). There are guidelines and recommendations for workplace heat exposure. However, the USW treats heat like any other health and safety hazard. We believe that in some cases there are proven ways to remove or reduce heat from the workplace, and we negotiate with our employers to implement the design and install equipment to accomplish this. However, when heat cannot be eliminated, the union works with its membership to provide relief from heat. Some examples of this are listed below.

Examples of Negotiated Heat Relief

In some USW represented workplaces the union has successfully negotiated –

- Air conditioned break areas provided throughout hot work areas.
- Workers are provided with cool water and sports drinks.
- Workers have portable cooling devices in their work area.
- Air conditioned control rooms are provided for workers to cool down.
- Employers follow heat stress and exposure guidelines.
- Workers in high heat work areas rotate work.
- Work shifts are adjusted.
- Personal protective equipment is provided and paid for to protect workers from heat.
- Time is provided for workers to adjust to the hot work environment.
- Workers are trained about heat and its effects.

Where can I get help or more information about heat in my workplace?

The best place to receive help on this or other health and safety matters is from your local union health & safety committee. These committees provide a forum for every member to raise concerns to the union without fear of retaliation from management. If the health & safety committee needs assistance, the International Union is available to them.

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