

Heat Stress

The Legal Requirements:

Employers have a duty under section 25(2)(h) of the Occupational Health and Safety Act to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker. This includes developing hot environment policies and procedures to protect workers in hot environments due to hot processes or hot weather.

For compliance purposes, the Ministry of Labour recommends the Threshold Limit Values (TLVs) for Heat Stress and Heat Strain published by the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH). These values are based on preventing unacclimatized workers' core body temperatures from rising above 38°C.

This guideline is intended to assist employers, workers and other workplace parties in understanding heat stress, and in developing and implementing policies to prevent heat stress-related illness in the workplace.

What Is Heat Stress?

Working or playing where it is hot puts stress on your body's cooling system. When heat is combined with other stresses such as hard physical work, loss of fluids, fatigue or some medical conditions, it may lead to heat-related illness, disability and even death.

This can happen to anybody—even the young and fit. In Ontario, heat stress is usually a concern during the summer. This is especially true early in the season, when people are not used to the heat.

Heat exposure may occur in many workplaces. Significant sources of heat can be found in workplaces such as foundries, smelters chemical plants, bakeries and commercial kitchens. For outdoor workers, direct sunlight is usually the main source of heat. In mines, geothermal gradients and equipment contribute to heat exposure. Humidity in workplaces also contributes to heat stress.

How We Cope With Heat

Your body is always generating heat and passing it to the environment. The harder your body is working, the more heat it has to lose. When the environment is hot or humid or has a source of radiant heat (for example, a furnace or the sun), your body must work harder to get rid of its heat.

If the air is moving (for example, from fans) and it is cooler than your body, it is easier for your body to pass heat to the environment.

Workers on medication or with pre-existing medical conditions may be more susceptible to heat stress as some medication may impair the body's response to heat. These workers should speak to their personal physicians about work in hot environments.

Heat Stress-Related Disorders

A summary of heat stress-related disorders, causes, symptoms, treatment and prevention is presented in the table below.

	Cause	Symptoms	Treatment	Prevention
Heat Rash	Hot humid environment; plugged sweat glands.	Red bumpy rash with severe itching.	Change into clean dry clothes often and avoid hot environments. Rinse skin with cool water.	Wash regularly to keep skin clean and dry.

	Cause	Symptoms	Treatment	Prevention
Heat Cramps	Heavy sweating from strenuous physical activity drains a person's body of fluid and salt, which cannot be replaced just by drinking water. Cramps occur from salt imbalance resulting from failure to replace salt lost from heavy sweating.	Painful cramps commonly in the most worked muscles (arms, legs or stomach) which occur suddenly at work or later at home. Heat cramps are serious because they can be a warning of other more dangerous heat-induced illnesses.	Move to a cool area; loosen clothing, gently massage and stretch affected muscles and drink cool salted water (¼ to ½ tsp. salt in 1 litre of water) or balanced commercial fluid electrolyte replacement beverage. If the cramps are severe or don't go away after salt and fluid replacement, seek medical aid. Salt tablets are not recommended.	Reduce activity levels and/or heat exposure. Drink fluids regularly. Workers should check on each other to help spot the symptoms that often precede heat stroke.
Fainting	Fluid loss and inadequate water intake and standing still, resulting in decreased blood flow to brain. Usually occurs in unacclimatized persons.	Sudden fainting after at least two hours of work; cool moist skin; weak pulse.	GET MEDICAL ATTENTION. Assess need for CPR. Move to a cool area; loosen clothing; make person lie down; and if the person is conscious, offer sips of cool water. Fainting may also be due to other illnesses.	Reduce activity levels and/or heat exposure. Drink fluids regularly. Move around and avoid standing in one place for too long. Workers should check on each other to help spot the symptoms that often precede heat stroke.

	Cause	Symptoms	Treatment	Prevention
Heat Exhaustion	Fluid loss and inadequate salt and water intake causes a person's body's cooling system to start to break down.	Heavy sweating; cool moist skin; body temperature over 38° C; weak pulse; normal or low blood pressure; person is tired and weak, and has nausea and vomiting; is very thirsty; or is panting or breathing rapidly; vision may be blurred.	GET MEDICAL ATTENTION. This condition can lead to heat stroke, which can kill. Move the person to a cool shaded area; loosen or remove excess clothing; provide cool water to drink; fan and spray with cool water. Do not leave affected person alone.	Reduce activity levels and/or heat exposure. Drink fluids regularly. Workers should check on each other to help spot the symptoms that often precede heat stroke.
Heat Stroke	If a person's body has used up all its water and salt reserves, it will stop sweating. This can cause body temperature to rise. Heat stroke may develop suddenly or may follow from heat exhaustion.	High body temperature (over 41°C) and any one of the following: the person is weak, confused, upset or acting strangely; has hot, dry, red skin; a fast pulse; headache or dizziness. In later stages, a person may pass out and have convulsions.	CALL AMBULANCE. This condition can kill a person quickly. Remove excess clothing; fan and spray the person with cool water; offer sips of cool water if the person is conscious.	Reduce activity levels and/or heat exposure. Drink fluids regularly. Workers should check on each other to help spot the symptoms that often precede heat stroke.

Controlling Heat Stress

Acclimatization

The longer you work in a hot environment, the better your body becomes at adjusting to the heat. This is called “acclimatization”. If you are ill or away from work for a week or so you can lose your acclimatization.

To become acclimatized, the following may be considered:

1. If you are experienced on the job, you should limit your time in hot working conditions to 50 per cent of the shift on the first day, 60 per cent of the shift on the second day, and 80 per cent of the shift on the third day. You should work a full shift the fourth day.

If you are not experienced on the job (if you are, for example, a new employee), you should start off spending 20 per cent of the time in hot working conditions on the first day and increase your time by 20 per cent each subsequent day.

2. Instead of reducing the exposure times to the job in a hot environment, you can become acclimatized by gradually increasing the physical demands of the job over a week or two.

If you have health problems or are not in good physical condition, you may need longer periods of acclimatization. Hot spells in Ontario seldom last long enough to allow acclimatization. However, exposure to workplace heat sources may permit acclimatization.

When there is a potential exposure to heat stress, control measures must be taken to prevent heat exposure in the workplace. These include engineering controls, administrative controls and protective clothing. Selection of appropriate workplace controls will vary, depending on the type of workplace and other factors. Some measures may include:

Engineering Controls

- Reduce physical demands of work task through mechanical assistance (hoists, lift-tables, etc.).
- Control the heat at its source through the use of insulating and reflective barriers (e.g. insulate furnace walls).
- Exhaust hot air and steam produced by operations.
- Reduce the temperature and humidity through air cooling.
- Provide cool, shaded work areas.
- Provide air-conditioned rest areas.
- Increase air movement if temperature is less than 35°C (e.g. use of fans).

Administrative Controls

- The employer should assess the demands of all jobs and have monitoring and control strategies in place for hot days and hot workplaces.
- Increase the frequency and length of rest breaks.

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- Schedule strenuous jobs to cooler times of the day.
 - Provide cool drinking water near workers and remind them to drink a cup about every 20 minutes.
 - Caution workers to avoid direct sunlight.
 - Assign additional workers or slow down the pace of work.
 - Make sure everyone is properly acclimatized.
 - Train workers to recognize the signs and symptoms of heat stress and start a "buddy system" since people are not likely to notice their own symptoms.
 - Pregnant workers and workers with a medical condition should discuss working in the heat with their physicians.
 - First Aid responders should be available and an emergency response plan should be in place in the event of a heat-related illness.
 - Investigate any heat-related incidents.

Protective Clothing

- Light summer clothing should be worn to allow free air movement and sweat evaporation.
- Outdoors, wear light-coloured clothing.
- In a high radiant heat situation, reflective clothing may help.
- For very hot environments, air, water or ice-cooled insulated clothing should be considered.
- Vapour barrier clothing, such as chemical protective clothing, greatly increases the amount of heat stress on the body, and extra caution is necessary such as heat strain (physiological) monitoring.

Managing Heat Stress from Process Heat

For an environment that is hot primarily due to process heat (furnaces, bakeries, smelters, etc.), the employer should follow the guidance of the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) as outlined in its booklet and documentation for the recommended Threshold Limit Values (TLVs), and set up a heat stress control plan in consultation with the workplace's joint health and safety committee or worker health and safety representative.

Further information on the ACGIH TLVs, and on the development of heat stress control plans, may be found at the following websites:

ACGIH

<http://www.acgih.org/home.htm>

U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)

http://www.osha.gov/dts/osta/otm/otm_iii/otm_iii_4.html

Managing Heat Stress Induced by Hot Weather

Most workplaces do not have "hot processes", but working in hot weather can pose health risks to their workers. For hot work environments due to hot weather, a hot weather plan is appropriate. A hot weather plan is a simplified heat stress control plan. A hot weather plan should establish the implementation criteria, or "triggers", to put the plan into effect. The criteria may include weather/environmental indicator triggers such as:

- Humidex reaching or exceeding 35;
- Environment Canada Humidex advisory (air temperature exceeding 30° C and Humidex exceeding 40);
- Environment Canada weather reports;
- Heat waves (three or more days of temperatures of 32° C or more); and/or
- Ontario Ministry of the Environment smog alert.

Generally, plans related to hot weather should be in place between May 1 and September 30 of each year.

The following websites have information on Humidex, weather reports and smog alerts:

Environment Canada

<http://www.msc.ec.gc.ca/>

Environment Canada Fact Sheet: Summer Severe Weather

<http://www.on.ec.gc.ca/severe-weather/summer.html>

Environment Canada Weather Office

http://www.weatheroffice.ec.gc.ca/canada_e.html

Air Quality Ontario Smog Advisories

<http://www.airqualityontario.com/>

Other Resources

Additional information on methods to monitor and manage workplace heat exposures may be found in the following resources:

WSIB Prevent Heat Stress

<http://www.wsib.ca/wsib/wsibsite.nsf/Public/PreventHeatStress>

This website provides links to information and tools on heat stress awareness, monitoring and control measures.

A link is given to access the “Heat Stress Awareness Toolkit” which includes a **guidebook**, a **poster**, and a **tool** to determine Humidex guidelines. This toolkit was developed by the members of the Occupational Health and Safety Council of Ontario (OHSCO).

Prevention Dynamics Ontario’s Virtual Health and Safety Portal

<http://www.preventiondynamics.ca/>

This website provides links to health and safety information, training materials, and consulting services offered by Ontario’s Health and Safety Associations and Partners.

Note: *Links to external websites are offered for the convenience of users in accessing related information. These links do not constitute an endorsement of the websites or their contents and the Ministry of Labour takes no responsibility for the views, contents or accuracy of the information presented by an external website.*

Remember that while complying with occupational health and safety laws, you are also required to comply with applicable environmental laws.

For further information or assistance, please contact your [local office of the Ministry of Labour](#).