Coping with Heat

Ten Tips for Staying Cool in Hot Workplaces
It won’t be long before the hot days of summer are upon us. Now is the time to start thinking about how you can keep those heat-related injuries to a minimum. The heat can be more than uncomfortable; it can be life-threatening. Approximately 500 people die from heat-related illnesses every year. If workers and employers follow a few simple guidelines, we can prevent the kinds of problems that can turn a heat wave into a tragedy.

OSHA suggests the following tips for employers and workers to prevent heat-related disorders, many of which are easily avoided.

1. Encourage workers to drink plenty of water (without salt) – about one cup of cool water every 15-20 minutes, even if they are not thirsty. Avoid alcohol, coffee and tea, which contribute to dehydration.

2. Help workers adjust to the heat by assigning a lighter workload and longer rest periods for the first five to seven days of intense heat. This process needs to start all over again when a worker returns from vacation or absence due to illness or injury.

3. Encourage workers to wear lightweight, loose-fitting, light-colored clothing. Workers should change if their clothing gets completely saturated.

4. Use general ventilation and spot cooling at points of high heat production. Good air flow increases evaporation and cooling of the skin. Stagnant atmospheric conditions and poor air quality can induce heat-related illnesses.

5. Train first aid workers to recognize and treat the signs of heat stress. Be sure that all workers know who is trained to render first aid. Supervisors should also be able to detect early signs of heat-related illness and permit workers to interrupt their work if they become extremely uncomfortable.

6. Consider a worker's physical condition when determining fitness to work in hot environments. Obesity, lack of conditioning, pregnancy and inadequate rest can increase susceptibility to heat stress.

7. Alternate work and rest periods, with longer rest periods in a cooler area. Shorter, but frequent, work-rest cycles are best. Schedule heavy work for cooler parts of the day and use appropriate protective clothing.

8. Certain medical conditions, such as heart conditions, or treatments like low-sodium diets and some medications, increase the risk from heat exposure. Seek medical advice in those cases.

9. Monitor temperatures, humidity and workers' responses to heat at least hourly.

10. Learn to spot the signs of heat stroke, which can be fatal. The symptoms are: mental confusion/loss of consciousness, body temperature of 106 degrees, and hot, dry skin. If someone has stopped sweating, seek medical attention immediately. Other heat-induced illnesses include heat exhaustion, heat cramps, skin rashes, swelling and loss of mental and physical work capacity.