



Heat Related Illnesses

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Every year, thousands of agricultural employees become sick from over-exposure to heat and some of them even end up dying. The sad thing is that these deaths are preventable as long as workers stay hydrated and take rests when they need to. Agricultural employees are one of the most at risk groups for heat exposure, working out in the sun all day in hot conditions so they must take extra care to make sure that they are doing what they can to stay safe. While there are many different types of illnesses caused by heat such as heat stress and heat cramps, the two most dangerous heat illnesses that agricultural workers have to worry about are heat exhaustion and heatstroke.

What exactly are heat exhaustion and heatstroke? Heat exhaustion sets in when your body gets too hot. It can be caused by physical exercise or hot weather. Usually not too big of a deal if identified and dealt with soon after, heat exhaustion does not always require medical attention. Heat exhaustion, left untreated though, can evolve into heat stroke and someone who is believed to be suffering from heatstroke needs to be taken to the hospital immediately. Heatstroke is much more serious than heat exhaustion and it can cause long-term damage to your organs and brain and can even kill you. Along with unaddressed heat exhaustion, strenuous physical activities or being exposed to incredible heat can lead to heatstroke. When the internal temperature of your body has reached 104 degrees or higher you officially have heatstroke.¹

There are many symptoms that can be found in a person who is suffering from both heat exhaustion and heatstroke. With heat exhaustion, a person will experience heavy sweating, feeling weak or confused, dizziness, nausea, headache, fast heartbeat, and dark colored urine. If you believe someone is suffering from heat exhaustion, then you need to get them out of the heat immediately, preferably into an air conditioned building. If you are unable to get them inside try to find a cool, shady place and make sure to have that person drink lots of water. Avoid alcohol and caffeinated drinks as this will make the dehydration worse. Take off any unnecessary clothing and apply cool water to their skin. The best way to do this is by giving them a cool bath or shower. If they do not feel better within thirty minutes, you should take them to the hospital. This is a sign that they might be developing heatstroke. In regards to heatstroke, they will experience a lot of the same symptoms listed above, but with a couple big

¹ https://www.osha.gov/dsg/topics/agriculturaloperations/hazards_controls.html

differences. Instead of heavy sweating, they will not be sweaty at all. Their skin will instead be dry and hot. They will also have a high fever, a flushed and red appearance to the skin, muscle weaknesses and cramps, vomiting, a fast heartbeat and breathing, the feeling of being confused and disoriented, and could also develop seizures. If you believe someone might have heatstroke, call emergency medical services right away. While you are waiting for them to arrive, do the same steps as above and take the person into an air conditioned building or a cool location, remove any unnecessary clothing that person may be wearing, and dampen their skin with cool water. It might also help to fan them. If you can, apply ice packs to the person's armpits, groins, neck, and back until medical help arrives. Since these areas of the body contain a lot of blood vessels close to the surface of the skin, this may help to cool them down.²

There are many different ways that you can avoid all heat related illnesses, you just need to take some precautionary steps. When outside, wear lightweight, light-colored, loose fitting clothing. Make sure to also wear a hat and sunscreen so that your body is fully protected from the sun. Drink plenty of water before going outside to work, while you are outside working, and after you are back inside and have finished working for the day. Along with this, drink more water and fewer drinks that contain caffeine and alcohol. Like stated above, this tends to dehydrate the body more than it does help it. For the hardest, most vigorous work activities, schedule them for either earlier or later in the day when it will not be as hot out. When you are working outside, make sure to drink plenty of fluids and stay hydrated. Try to take a break for water every fifteen to twenty minutes even if you aren't thirsty.³ If you take all of these precautions, you and the people you work with will all stay healthy.

WATER. REST. SHADE. This is the new slogan that the Occupational Health and Safety Administration has adopted for those in the agricultural industry working out in the fields this summer.⁴ If you follow these three simple words, you will be set for the hottest months of this year. It doesn't cost much money to do, doesn't take much time, and can save a life.

² <http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/prevention-wellness/staying-healthy/first-aid/heat-exhaustion-an-heatstroke.html>

³ <http://nasdonline.org/137/d001702/heat-stress.html>

⁴ https://www.osha.gov/dsg/topics/agriculturaloperations/hazards_controls.html