

Turning Down the Temperature: Reducing the Risk of Heat-Related Illnesses in the Workplace

Jed Blackburn

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The earth has hit an ominous milestone: the hottest average temperature in recorded history with several days in recent weeks setting (and then beating) that dubious record. Canada is no exception: record temperatures have been recorded across the country and heat warnings have been issued in many provinces and territories. This likely does not come as a surprise to Canadians who have spent any length of time outdoors this summer.

Simply put, Canadians are facing unprecedented heat waves and there is every reason to believe this will continue in the future. Accordingly, the risk of heat stress in the workplace is one that is only going to increase going forward.

What is Heat Stress?

Heat stress occurs when one's body temperature rises above normal ranges faster than it can shed the excess heat, which can be caused or contributed to by the surrounding environment, work activity, and a variety of personal factors. Heat stress can result in a number of heat-related illnesses, including heat cramps, heat exhaustion, and, most seriously, heat stroke (which can be fatal). Early signs of heat-related illnesses to watch out for include excessive sweating, dizziness, and nausea.

Employer Obligations Under Occupational Health & Safety Legislation

What can and should employers do to address these risks?

While federal and provincial occupational health and safety legislation typically do not set specific temperature limits for workplaces, employers nonetheless have the obligation to take all reasonable precautions to protect their workers and provide safe workplaces. This includes taking all reasonable steps to protect against the health risks posed by extreme heat.

The specific steps to be taken will depend upon the individual workplace, nature of the work, and relevant jurisdiction, but in all cases it is recommended that employers put a plan in place to assess and mitigate the risks posed by excessive temperatures. Indeed, Alberta,¹ British Columbia,² and Ontario³ all recommend

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that employers conduct a hazard assessment and/or implement a heat stress control plan or prevention program based on their individual work environments.

An employer's heat stress control plan/prevention program should:

- Conduct a hazard assessment with respect to heat-related health risks in the workplace;
- Provide training on the health risks and prevention of heat-related illnesses;
- Monitor heat-related risks and set criteria to trigger preventative actions (e.g., if heat wave notices are issued by Environment Canada or the humidex reaches a certain level in the workplace);
- Determine specific responses or risk-mitigating actions to be taken;
- Promote regular hydration and ensure workers have access to water and cool areas; and
- Institute first aid and emergency procedures, including setting out how worker symptoms will be monitored and how incidents of health-related illnesses will be investigated.

Practical Steps to Reduce Heat-Related Risk in the Workplace

In addition to a formal heat stress control plan, employers can take a number of practical steps to reduce health risks and create a more comfortable workplace during heat waves/the summer months. These steps can include the following:

- Using air conditioning, fans, and screens/umbrellas (where applicable) to reduce environmental temperatures;
- Reviewing workplace dress codes and promoting the wearing of light, loose-fitting clothing during summer months;
- Allowing flexibility as to the scheduling and location of more physically demanding work activities (e.g., scheduling more active work for the cooler part of the day and/or moving work locations to cooler/shaded areas);
- Providing access to and promoting the consumption of water or other caffeine-free beverages;
- Creating a cooling station for workers, particularly those in outdoor work environments; and
- Providing more frequent rest breaks and/or reducing the pace of certain work activities.

Conclusion

The risk of heat stress and heat-related illnesses in the workplace are serious and, given rising temperatures, are only likely to increase. While employers should always prioritize the health and safety of their workers, Canadian occupational health and safety legislation specifically requires that all reasonable precautions be taken to do so, and this includes the risks posed by excessive temperatures. Failure to take reasonable precautionary steps to protect their workers from these risks can result in liabilities for employers

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(including significant fines or penalties under occupational health and safety legislation).

¹ Alberta OHS, "Working in Extreme Temperatures", <<https://www.alberta.ca/working-extreme-temperatures.aspx>>

² WorkSafeBC, "Preventing Heat Stress at Work" <<https://www.worksafebc.com/resources/health-safety/books-guides/preventing-heat-stress-at-work?lang=en>>

³ Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, "Managing Heat Stress at Work" <<https://www.ontario.ca/page/managing-heat-stress-work>>

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