Guard against heat stress at work



WorkSafe has issued a warning on guarding against the effects of extreme temperatures in work environments during the current heatwave and the remainder of summer.

WorkSafe WA Commissioner Lex McCulloch today reminded employers and workers of the need to take extra care during the summer months to avoid the risk of heat stress or the more serious heat stroke.

“Both working outside in heatwave conditions and exposure to constant high temperatures in indoor workplaces such as foundries can result in heat stress or even heat stroke,” Mr McCulloch said.

“Workplace safety laws require an employer to provide a working environment in which workers are not exposed to hazards and this includes, as far as is practicable, protecting employees from extremes in temperature.

“The increased sweating caused by heat depletes the body’s fluids and can lead to tiredness, irritability, inattention and muscular cramps – these are the symptoms of heat stress.

“Apart from the obvious physical discomfort of these symptoms, they may increase the risk of workplace injuries by taking a worker’s attention away from the task at hand, and this is a major concern.”

Workers in extremely hot environments can lose up to a litre of fluid every hour, and it is vital that this lost fluid is replaced.

Heat stress can be avoided by taking simple steps such as drinking at frequent intervals, having rest pauses in a cool place, helping sweat evaporate by increasing air circulation and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Where possible, it is also advisable to reorganise work schedules so outdoor tasks are carried out early in the morning and late in the day to avoid peak temperatures.

The type of clothing worn is also very important – loose clothing allows air to circulate, improving the evaporation of sweat.

Heat stroke is a far more serious condition that must be treated immediately.

The signs of heat stroke are cessation in sweating, high body temperature and hot and dry skin. Confusion and loss of consciousness may occur.

If heat stroke is suspected, the person should be treated by a doctor as soon as possible.

Until medical treatment is available, the person should be cooled down as quickly as possible by methods such as soaking clothing in cold water and increasing air movement by fanning.

“The effects of extreme or sustained heat can seriously affect a worker’s concentration levels, and the consequences can be very serious,” Mr McCulloch said.

“Guarding against heat stress and heat stroke is part of providing a safe and healthy workplace, and I urge employers to ensure that preventative measures are in place.”

Further information on working in hot conditions can be obtained by telephoning WorkSafe on 1300 307877, or on the website at www.worksafe.wa.gov.au.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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