Hot Topic: Stepped-Up Enforcement Aims to

Reduce Heat Exposure Risks

Summer is approaching, and with it comes temperatures that seem to be getting hotter and staying hot longer. According to OSHA and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), data shows that 18 of the last 19 years have been the hottest on average since 2004. In addition, the three-year average of heat-related fatalities among workers has doubled since the early 1990s — even though heat-related illnesses, injuries, and fatalities are underreported. In response to this and other similar data, OSHA has increased its enforcement of heat-related initiatives.

One step OSHA has taken is to launch a National Emphasis Program (NEP) focusing on heat exposure in the workplace. The NEP is part of a broader Department of Labor response to Executive Order 14008, Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, which established an interagency effort and commitment to workplace safety, climate resilience, and environmental justice. The goal of the Heat NEP is to reduce or eliminate worker exposures to heat-related hazards that result in illnesses, injuries, and deaths by targeting industries and worksites where employees are exposed without adequate protection. Heat-related inspections have accounted for 0.5 percent of all since 2018. OSHA plans to double that figure by implementing the NEP.

Additionally, OSHA has taken the first steps to develop a permanent heat illness prevention standard.

On Oct. 27, 2021, OSHA published an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPRM) for Heat Injury and Illness Prevention in Outdoor and Indoor Work Settings in the Federal Register. The comment period has since closed, and the rule is now in the second stage of OSHA's seven-stage rulemaking process. The ANPRM references several different heat-related subjects, including acclimatization, training, controls, and heat illness prevention plans and programs. It is likely that a final rule would include requirements for these elements.

Ways to Protect Employees

As an employer or safety professional, you can best prepare your workplace and protect employees by conducting a hazard assessment to determine if any tasks or jobs could expose workers to excessive heat. A general rule of thumb is to identify tasks or jobs that expose employees to heat above 85 degrees Fahrenheit for periods greater than 15 minutes.

A heat illness prevention program should be developed for all work sites where employees are exposed to heat hazards. At a minimum, an effective program includes the following:

- **Procedures for Providing Water and Access to Shade or Cooling Areas**
  The best ways to reduce the likelihood of heat illness are proper hydration and easy access to shade or cool-down areas. Your program should have a defined process and responsibilities for providing these two vital preventive measures.

- **Procedures for Employee and Supervisor Training**
  Employees and supervisors should be trained in both recognizing symptoms of various heat illnesses and responding to them. Additionally, supervisors should be trained in monitoring the conditions of the workplace and in responding to excessive heat.

- **Acclimation Procedures**
  Seventy percent of heat-related deaths occur in the first few days of working in the heat, with 50 percent occurring on the first day of work. An effective acclimation plan allows workers' bodies to adapt to working in heat and reduces the likelihood of heat illness.

- **Heat-Specific Emergency Response Procedures**
  The treatment of heat illnesses, especially heat stroke, needs to be prompt and effective. A work-site-specific emergency response plan will ensure that proper precautions and provisions are in place.

While ensuring safety is a year-round activity, seasonal temperature extremes, both hot and cold, need to receive specific attention. Rising temperatures and OSHA's increased emphasis on controlling excessive heat exposure signal the need for increased caution. Employers may need to implement new procedures or augment current procedures to ensure both worker protection and regulatory compliance. We may not be able to change the weather, but we can take steps to be prepared and stay safe.

Ready to beat the heat? Connect with us to assess your organization's heat exposure risks and reduce heat-related illnesses and injuries.

Learn More

Connect with us:

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