

Heat stress

Why it's important

Heat stress is caused by a combination of factors: the type of work you're doing, the surrounding air temperature and humidity, exposure to sunlight, air movement and the clothes you're wearing.

If the heat load on your body is too great, your core temperature rises, causing a variety of heat stress disorders ranging from an irritating heat rash to a life-threatening heat stroke.

Heat stress disorders affect us in different ways depending on their severity:

- Mild cases of heat stress cause fatigue, irritability, thirst or a heat rash. As the level of heat stress increases, heat cramps develop as a result of heavy exertion, dehydration and the loss of body salts.
- Fainting, heat exhaustion (pale and clammy skin, weakness, dizziness and nausea) and heat stroke (hot and dry skin, increased heart and breathing rate and confusion) are the three most severe effects of heat stress. Each can be life-threatening and requires immediate medical attention.

Heat stress is a safety hazard as well as a health hazard. In hot workplaces, heavy tasks become exhausting, we become easily distracted, our patience is shorter, we are less alert, more irritable and mental and physical tasks requiring skill become much more difficult to perform safely.

How to control the hazards

There are a number of ways forestry employers can reduce the risk of heat stress on the job.

- The first line of defence is engineering controls such as cool rest areas for outdoor workers, ventilation and air conditioning systems in mills, as well as insulating or shielding heat sources from nearby workers.
- Administrative controls and work practices could include rescheduling hot work for cooler times of the day, reducing workers' exposure time to the heat, allowing workers adequate time to get ac-

customed to hotter environments, providing cool drinking water and ensuring that frequent rest breaks are taken.

- It's important to drink plenty of cool water while working in the heat. If the water lost through sweating is not replaced, it will result in dehydration and a reduction in the volume of circulating blood in your body.
- Personal apparel and special protective equipment are also a very important control measure. Wear light-coloured clothing and hat to reflect radiant heat away from your body. Loose-fitting clothing should be worn when humidity levels are high.
- Under extreme heat conditions, air and water-cooled garments or ice-packet vests should be considered.
- The Ontario Ministry of Labour recommends that workplaces develop of a hot weather plan to control heat stress hazards. A hot weather plan should establish environmental "triggers" that put the plan into effect. These triggers could include a Humidex reading of 35° Celsius or more, A Humidex Advisory from Environment Canada, and heat waves consisting of three or more days of temperatures of 32°C or more.

Show and tell

Talk about your company's hot weather policy and procedures.

Emphasize that the hotter it gets, whether indoors or out, the more frequent breaks workers require to cool off.

Notes:
