Preventing heat-related illnesses

Source: Wayne Sanderson, professor and director of CARERC and SCAHIP

Some things are for certain about Kentucky summers--they are going to be hot and humid. When heat and humidity come together, they can increase your risk of experiencing a heat-related illness like heat cramps, heat exhaustion or sometimes deadly heat stroke. Fortunately, you can take measures to protect yourself and your workers from contracting these illnesses.

Heat-related illnesses occur when your body’s temperature rises faster than you can cool yourself. These illnesses can be exacerbated by hot and humid weather, lack of wind, lack of shade, dehydration, not taking breaks, wearing improper clothing and consuming alcohol 24 hours before working outdoors. You can also experience a heat-related illness by working near a radiant heat source such as hot engines or machinery.

Heat-related illnesses can affect anyone regardless of their age or physical ability. New workers who are not used to working in hot, humid weather, workers with chronic health conditions and those over 60 years old may be more susceptible to contracting a heat-related illness. Certain medications including those used for colds, blood pressure control, dizziness and depression can lower your ability to tolerate heat and humidity. Recently experiencing a short-term illness, such as a gastrointestinal illness or cold, can increase your risk for getting a heat-related illness.

To prevent heat-related illness, you should plan strenuous outdoor activities for the early morning or late evening hours, when temperatures are the coolest. Wear lightweight and light-colored clothing, which will reflect heat and sunlight and help your body maintain a normal temperature. Stay hydrated by taking frequent water breaks. Take frequent rest breaks during the day in shaded or air-conditioned areas. Use sunscreen and avoid getting too much sun. A sunburn can make it harder to lower your body temperature. Work in groups, so you can monitor each other for heat-related illnesses.

Symptoms of a heat-related illness include a high body temperature, confusion, loss of coordination, sweating, skin that is hot and dry, throbbing headache, exhaustion, rapid heart rate, nausea, irritability, rapid breathing, muscle cramps and seizures.

If you suspect you or one of your employees has a heat-related illness, immediately get out of the sun and into a cool area. Lie down and loosen your clothing. Apply a cool, wet cloth to your body. Drink water. A severe heat-related illness, such as heat stroke, can be life threatening and requires prompt medical attention. In severe cases, call 911 or seek immediate medical attention.

More information on preventing heat-related illnesses is available on the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health websites <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/heatstress/heatapp.html> or [https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/mining/UserFiles/works/pdfs/2017-125.pdf](https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fniosh%2Fmining%2FUserFiles%2Fworks%2Fpdfs%2F2017-125.pdf&data=04%7C01%7Ckatie.pratt%40uky.edu%7Cda4fa558d8664c2c640608d930e60779%7C2b30530b69b64457b818481cb53d42ae%7C0%7C0%7C637594586917058529%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=b5UqkFGEYbP7CO0T7zm274RNBG%2BzQyZlr50NnSfWhaU%3D&reserved=0) or by contacting the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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