

Arizona's summertime heat wave could be hazardous to employees' health

Record-breaking temperatures—the likes of which we really haven't seen since 1990—take a toll on everyone. This year's summer heat has even grounded planes amid fears that tires could melt or gauges could be compromised. As the temperatures continue to soar, we are reminded of the extra precautions necessary to survive (literally) the hazards that accompany an Arizona summer. We know to keep our pets indoors, drink a lot of water, and avoid midday outings, but perhaps you haven't considered the employment-related issues that may arise as a result of the rising heat index. Read on for steps to ensure employee health.

Oh, and in case it makes you feel better, we haven't yet neared the highest temperature ever recorded in Arizona—Lake Havasu hit 128 in 1994!

Cruel Summer

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), thousands of U.S. workers suffer from on-the-job heat-related illnesses every year. In 2016, more than 20 workers died from heat-related illnesses. Although OSHA doesn't have heat illness prevention standards, the General Duty Clause of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 (OSH Act) requires employers to protect workers from hazards likely to cause death or serious physical harm, including hazards related to excessive heat exposure.

OSHA has applied the General Duty Clause in citing employers whose employees were exposed to potentially serious harm in excessively hot work environments. Seven years into its Campaign to Prevent Heat Illness in Outdoor Workers, OSHA has stepped up its enforcement against employers that fail to protect workers from heat-related illnesses, often imposing increased penalties for violations.



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Hot, hot heat

OSHA's stepped-up enforcement efforts do not come without guidance. To prevent heat-related illnesses and injuries, the agency provides "acceptable methods for employers to reduce heat stress hazards in the workplace":

- Provide workers with cold water that is convenient and close to the work area. Encourage them to drink before they are thirsty (a sign of dehydration) and about every 15 minutes. Discourage beverages that dehydrate the body such as coffee, tea, and caffeinated soft drinks.
- Engage in acclimatization at the start of each heat season and for new employees or employees who return from an absence. That includes assigning those workers a light workload and providing them longer rest periods for at least the first five to seven days of intense heat.
- Encourage workers to wear lightweight, light-colored, and loose-fitting clothing.
- Provide an air-conditioned or shaded rest area, and offer frequent rest periods.
- Be flexible with work schedules. That may include scheduling physically demanding work for cooler times of the day and scheduling nonessential outdoor projects for days with a lower heat index.
- Plan for emergencies, and train workers on how to recognize heat-related illnesses and provide first aid to individuals suffering from them. Train supervisors to detect early signs of heat-related illnesses, actively monitor employees for those signs, and allow employees to interrupt their work because of extreme discomfort.
- Encourage workers to look out for each other, and create a partner system that requires employees to watch for signs of heat-related illnesses in coworkers.

While we are on the topic, the signs of heat exhaustion include headaches, dizziness, fainting, weakness, wet skin, irritability, confusion, thirst, nausea, and vomiting. Worse yet, employees suffering from heat stroke may be confused or unable to think clearly, pass out, collapse, or have seizures.

Consider providing OSHA's "heat stress card" (available at www.osha.gov/Publications/osha3154.pdf) to all employees who face conditions that make them vulnerable to heat-related health hazards. The quick reference guide lists simple precautions employees can take to prevent heat-related deaths and injuries. The card is free for employers and is available in both English and Spanish.

Summer madness

Note that a rise in outdoor temperatures may correspond with an increased anticipation of family vacations and the spirit of summer. Often, when the heat is on, employees relax their attitudes toward following employer dress code policies and other workplace rules. While identifying and addressing dress code violations is a year-round issue, summertime attire comes with unique challenges.

Review your handbooks to determine whether your dress code policies are clear and understandable. Because of the heat, you may want to consider implementing a summertime dress code policy (say, from Memorial Day to Labor Day) that offers relaxed alternatives to traditional business dress codes. A good dress code policy will identify clothing that is inappropriate for the workplace in addition to offering guidelines on what is appropriate summer dress. Train supervisors on proper and evenhanded enforcement of your dress code policy to avoid discrimination claims.

Some like it hot

Following these tips may be all the inspiration you need to ward off perspiration. Finally, for those of you wondering why Arizonans are willing to continually endure the extreme heat that accompanies summer, we'll take the heat over your cold winters. After all, you don't have to shovel heat.