

# Using the Heat Index: A Guide for Employers

## Introduction

Outdoor workers who are exposed to hot and humid conditions are at risk of heat-related illness. The risk of heat-related illness becomes greater as the weather gets hotter and more humid. This situation is particularly serious when hot weather arrives suddenly early in the season, before workers have had a chance to adapt to warm weather.

For people working outdoors in hot weather, both air temperature and humidity affect how hot they feel. The **"heat index"** is a single value that takes both temperature and humidity into account. The higher the heat index, the hotter the weather feels, since sweat does not readily evaporate and cool the skin. The heat index is a better measure than air temperature alone for estimating the risk to workers from environmental heat sources.

### Heat-related illness can be prevented.

OSHA does not have a specific standard that covers working in hot environments. Nonetheless, under the OSH Act, employers have a duty to protect workers from recognized serious hazards in the workplace, including heat-related hazards. This guide helps employers and worksite supervisors prepare and implement hot weather plans. It explains how to use the

heat index to determine when extra precautions are needed at a worksite to protect workers from environmental contributions to heat-related illness. Workers performing strenuous activity, workers using heavy or non-breathable protective clothing, and workers who are new to an outdoor job need additional precautions beyond those warranted by heat index alone.

**Workers new to outdoor jobs are generally most at risk for heat-related illnesses. For example, Cal/OSHA investigated 25 incidents of heat-related illness in 2005. In almost half of the cases, the worker involved was on their first day of work and in 80% of the cases the worker involved had only been on the job for four or fewer days. That's why it's important to gradually increase the workload or allow more frequent breaks to help new workers and those returning to a job after time away build up a tolerance for hot conditions. Make sure that workers understand the risks and are "acclimatized".**

Heat Index	Risk Level	Protective Measures
Less than 91°F	Lower (Caution)	Basic heat safety and planning
91° to 103°F	Moderate	Implement precautions and heighten awareness
103° to 115°F	High	Additional precautions to protect workers
Greater than 115°F	Very High to Extreme	Triggers even more aggressive protective measures

**Two primary sources of heat for workers:** Workers become overheated from two primary sources: (1) the environmental conditions in which they work and (2) the internal heat generated by physical labor. Heat-related illnesses occur when the body is not able to lose enough heat to balance the heat generated by physical work and external heat sources. Weather conditions are the primary external heat sources for outdoor workers.

**Outdoor workers** include any workers who spend a substantial portion of the shift outdoors. Examples include construction workers, agricultural workers, baggage handlers, electrical power transmission and control workers, and landscaping and yard maintenance workers. These workers are at risk of heat-related illness when the heat index is high. Additional risk factors are listed below. *These must be taken into consideration even when the heat index is lower.*

- Work in direct sunlight
- Perform prolonged or strenuous work
- Wear heavy protective clothing or impermeable suits

\*This guidance is advisory in nature and informational in content. It is not a standard or regulation, and it neither creates new legal obligations nor alters existing obligations created by OSHA standards or the Occupational Safety and Health Act. Pursuant to the OSH Act, employers must comply with safety and health standards and regulations issued and enforced either by OSHA or by an OSHA-approved State Plan. In addition, the Act's General Duty Clause, Section 5(a)(1), requires employers to provide their employees with a workplace free from recognized hazards likely to cause death or serious physical harm.