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PREPARING FOR SUMMER'S HEAT



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In some parts of the country, it already feels like summer. For the rest, the heat will soon be turning up. As much as most people enjoy the warmth of the summer sun, extreme heat accompanied by high humidity can be dangerous, even deadly. Each year, the summer heat kills nearly 175 Americans and sickens thousands more.

It's important to remember that heat safety is not just something to be aware of while enjoying leisure activities on the weekends – it's also a major risk exposure for your business on any given work day.

Health care providers whose duties call for them to work in overheated environments often find their own health – and the health of those they serve – in jeopardy during summer months. A home health aide, for example, can quickly succumb to the heat while performing strenuous activities such as lifting heavy objects in a patient's home that's not properly cooled. An employee who suffers from a heat-related illness while on the job could result in a potential workers' compensation exposure for your business. So, as an employer, ensuring your employees' safety by providing them heat safety education is an important risk mitigation strategy.

And, as a home health or home care provider, it's equally important that your staff is educated to effectively monitor and ensure the heat safety of their patients. It is a potential liability exposure for your business should a patient become ill due to overheating while in your care. For example, a nurse taking a group of senior living facility residents on an outing can inadvertently cause great harm to those residents by leaving them in a transport vehicle too long with the air conditioning turned off.

It's important to remember also that your location can play a major role in the heat safety of your patients and employees. Because of a greater concentration of asphalt and concrete, people living in urban areas may be at greater risk from the effects of an extended period of heat and high humidity than their rural counterparts. Asphalt and concrete store up heat and gradually release it at night, producing higher nighttime temperatures.

SYMPTOMS OF HEAT STRESS

There are three types of heat stress. These are their symptoms:

- **Heat cramps:** Severe muscle cramps in the back, stomach, arms, and legs due to the loss of body salt and water during times of heavy perspiration.
- **Heat exhaustion:** Usually occurs when a person cannot sweat enough to cool the body, usually caused by not

drinking enough fluids during hot weather. Symptoms: dizziness, weakness, nausea, headache, vomiting, blurry vision, sweaty skin, difficulty speaking, body temperature up to 101°F, feeling hot and thirsty.

- **Heat stroke (or sun stroke):** A very serious medical condition caused by untreated heat exhaustion and that must be treated quickly by a trained professional. Symptoms: absence of sweating, unaware of thirst and heat, body temperature rising quickly above 101°F, confusion or delirium, possible loss of consciousness or seizure.

AVOIDING HEAT ILLNESSES

A combination of heat and high humidity can be uncomfortable and dangerous. Here are some suggestions on how to stay cool when working in summer's extreme heat:

- Drink plenty of water, even when you don't feel thirsty. Feeling thirsty means your body is heading toward dehydration. Don't wait until you're thirsty to drink. An average adult needs eight, 8-ounce glasses of water a day – even more than that in the summer. Try to drink 8 ounces every 20-30 minutes.
- Stay away from caffeine and sodas – they can dehydrate you.
- Wear loose-fitting, lightweight, and light-colored clothing made of breathable fabric.
- Gradually adapt to working in hot environments, especially when performing strenuous tasks. Avoid overexertion during peak temperature periods of the day.
- Eat well-balanced, light and regular meals.
- Get trained in first aid to learn how to treat heat-related illnesses.
- Listen to your local weather forecasts for any heat advisories, such as:
 - Excessive heat watch where conditions are such that temperatures could reach or exceed local excessive heat warning criteria in the next 24 to 72 hours.
 - Excessive heat warning where heat index values are expected to meet or exceed locally defined warning criteria for at least two days.

TREATMENT FOR HEAT ILLNESSES

It's critical that a person with a heat illness be treated as soon as possible. Follow the first-aid steps below. If that person is

you, ask a co-worker to help you.

- **Heat cramps:** Move the person to a cooler area and give them water or another cool, non-alcoholic beverage. The person should then be given a medical exam.
- **Heat exhaustion:** Move the person to a cooler area, keep them lying down with their legs slightly elevated. Fan their body or apply cool, wet towels to cool their body. Give them approximately 6 ounces of water every 15 minutes. The person should then be given a medical exam.
- **Heat stroke:** Heat stroke is life-threatening, so you must act quickly! Call 9-1-1 immediately. Move the person to a cooler area, remove their outer clothing, and cool them with ice on their neck, armpits, and groin. If they're able to swallow, give them small amounts of water every 15 minutes or until help arrives.

VEHICLE HEAT SAFETY

No matter what part of the country you live, it doesn't take long for the interior of a parked vehicle to heat up to over 100 degrees in the summer, particularly in non-shaded areas. Here are some tips to help you and any passengers stay safe from excessive heat inside a vehicle:

- Purchase a windshield shade; they're inexpensive.
- Lower all windows a quarter to half inch.
- Before anyone sits inside the vehicle, test all vinyl seat surfaces and metal parts like seat belt buckle to prevent burns.
- If possible before loading any passengers, start the vehicle, turn the air conditioner on to the coolest temperature, lower windows all the way until you can feel the interior beginning to cool.
- Have regular maintenance performed on the vehicle:
 - Have the cooling system flushed and filled on schedule to prevent overheating.
 - Have the level, condition, and color/concentration of coolant checked.
 - Have all other fluids checked and ask the mechanic to inspect drive belts, hoses, and clamps.

OUTDOOR SAFETY

In addition to the tips for avoiding heat illnesses while working indoors, below are suggestions to help avoid heat-related issues while outside during excessive heat in the summer:



- Protect your face and head by wearing a wide-brimmed hat.
- Avoid strenuous activity during the hottest part of the day. Use a buddy system, and take frequent breaks.
- Avoid, as much as possible, frequent trips in and out of air conditioned environments.
- Avoid using salt tablets unless directed to do so by a physician.

CONCLUSION

It is important to manage your risk during summer months from two perspectives:

- Making sure your employees are equipped to take care of their own heat safety (a workers' compensation exposure) through proper training.
- Making sure your staff are educated to monitor and ensure the heat safety of the patients in their care (a liability exposure).

For more information and resources about heat safety, or to ensure your current Workers' Compensation and General/ Professional Liability policies adequately protect your business, contact the VGM Insurance team today at 800-362-3363 or info@vgminsurance.com .