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It's the time of year to be aware of the dangers of heat stress

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Earlier this summer, federal OSHA held a press conference with meteorologists and weather forecasters to address the dangers of heat stress during the summer months.

At the press conference, Dr. David Michaels, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health, reported that in 2012 at least 31 workers died of heat-related illness and another 4,120 became sick, figures which he said were undoubtedly underestimated.

For those reasons, OSHA is continuing its nationwide heat awareness campaign that began three years ago. The campaign has a simple, 3-word message: "Water. Rest. Shade."

Dr. Michaels emphasized that employers are responsible for providing workplaces that are safe from serious recognized hazards, including environmental heat.

He said: "Heat is a serious hazard that affects workers in many industries. We have found that the workers who are most at risk for heat-related illnesses are those who are new to outdoor jobs — especially temporary workers — or those that have returned from more than a week away.

Workers are particularly at risk if the weather has just gotten hot, and they have not been acclimatized to the heat."

Dr. Michaels went on to say that OSHA's message to employers is:

- Provide workers with water, rest and shade; workers should drink water every 15 minutes, even if they are not thirsty; rest in the shade to cool down; and wear a hat and light colored clothing;

- Acclimatize new and returning workers to the heat by gradually increasing workload and providing breaks;
- Train workers about the symptoms of heat-related illnesses and their prevention; and
- Monitor workers for signs of illness.

Dr. Michaels reminded the audience that the National Weather Service now includes worker safety information in all its extreme heat alerts, and important worker safety information is now included on NOAA's Heat Watch page.

The two most important heat-related illnesses to watch out for are:

- **Heat exhaustion.** Symptoms include headache, nausea, dizziness, weakness, thirst, and heavy sweating. It can turn into heat stroke quickly if immediate action is not taken.

- **Heat stroke.** This is the most serious heat-related illness and requires immediate medical attention. Symptoms include confusion, fainting, seizures, very high body temperatures and hot, dry skin or profuse sweating. The visible signs of heat stroke are red, hot, dry skin or excessive sweating, confusion, seizures and fainting.

It is very important for workers to look for signs of heat exhaustion or heat stroke in co-workers, to be educated by their employers to take heat exhaustion very seriously and stop for first aid before it becomes heat stroke.

OSHA does not have a specific regulatory standard on the hazard of environmental heat. Employers' duty to protect employees from this hazard falls under the general duty clause, which requires employers to provide a workplace free from recognized hazards that cause or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm.

OSHA has no specific standard on environmental heat. ... protecting employees falls under general duty clause to provide a workplace free of recognized hazards.