

DON'T RISK LETTING EMPLOYEES GET BURNED

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What can employers do to help protect outdoor workers from exposure to sun in the summer?

Employees across Oregon are emerging from a long and dark winter, gazing upward to the sky at that unusual phenomenon – sunny weather. As we head into the summer months in the Pacific Northwest, those employers that regularly employ outdoor workers need to consider the safety risks associated with these positions. Examples of jobs involving a significant amount of outdoor activity include construction and transportation, athletic field and golf course maintenance, hotel and country club pool supervision, restaurant patio service, landscaping, fishing and select environmental work.

Outdoor workers run a greater risk than the average person of developing skin cancer or some other kind of sun-exposure disease. Add smoking to that exposure and an employee's chances of developing a cancer or facing poorer prognoses for surviving a melanoma also increase. This is especially true for men. Laborers smoke at a rate twice the national average and primarily work outside.

The Occupational Safety and Health Act does not include specific regulation addressing an employer's obligation to protect employees from the hazards created by sun exposure. However, such a requirement is addressed indirectly by the OSH Act's Personal Protective Equipment rule that requires "protective clothing" and other "shields and barriers" from hazardous exposure.

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So, what should employers do to avoid the summertime blues? Although the likelihood of an OSHA visit due to sun exposure is minimal, costs associated with illness, treatment and absence due to skin cancers can be significant. With a little time and money, an employer can invest in helping it's employees live healthier lives, and in turn benefit from better productivity and higher morale in the workplace. Many employers have instituted wellness programs based on this philosophy. A general sun protection program is an essential part of any comprehensive wellness program.

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