

The Heat Factor: What Every Company Should Know

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As the summer heat index continues to rise virtually everywhere in the nation, it's time for construction companies to review their policies for protecting workers from direct exposure to the sun.

The Occupational Safety and Health Act does not provide specific regulations on employer responsibility for heat- and sun-related hazards. However, the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) rule clearly states that employers must provide both protective equipment and training to employees if they work under certain conditions, including exposure to sunlight and heat. This rule embraces apparel and equipment that protects an employee's eyes, face, head, and extremities, as well as protective shields and barriers. At least one OSHA Standard Interpretation of PPE specifically requires employers to protect their employees from overexposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun.

The rule, however, is not quite as definitive in determining what level of exposure merits "over-exposure." While an OSHA visit for noncompliance is unlikely, the financial risks can be significant. From illness and skin-burning to extreme exhaustion and unconsciousness—and resulting workers' compensation costs—employers would be wise to create and adhere to policies that protect their employees. Every employer—and employee—must recognize the danger of heat and sunlight and make every effort to mitigate the impact. Don't wait for an unpleasant occurrence to focus on preventive measures. Put plans and policies in place, and make enforcement routine.

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