Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers Inc.

Heat stress and Sun safety

For Employers Hiring Migrant Farm Workers

Since 2006, OHCOW has provided occupational health support to more than a thousand migrant farm workers and their employers in Ontario through clinical consultations for individuals with occupational health concerns, and prevention-based occupational health and safety materials, tools and workshops. **All our services are free of charge.** This factsheet draws from our experience as well as from research conducted by other health and safety organizations working with migrant workers.

Why Heat Stress?

The physical nature of farm work creates heat from within muscles that can increase body temperature. When this internal heat is combined with the sun's effects as well as humidity there is a risk of workers experiencing heat stress, heat exhaustion, and if not addressed, heat stroke (which can be fatal). From speaking to migrant farm workers and seeing them clinically, many have identified experiencing mild symptoms of heat stress, while others report more severe symptoms including dizziness and nausea or knowing coworkers who have fainted.

Workshop Lessons and Suggestions

Adapted from research by the US National Center for Farmworker Health and from a heat and sun safety program designed by CAL OSHA, OHCOW staff have developed a workshop that provides information about heat stress, exhaustion and stroke, identifying the signs and symptoms, and steps to reduce the risk through proper hydration and sun protection. **From 2012-2014 we conducted 25 heat stress and sun safety workshops to a total of 500 migrant farm workers from Mexico and the Caribbean.** Below are some key findings from these workshops and corresponding suggestions that may be useful for developing or updating health and safety programs around this issue.

Heat Stress and Sun Safety Workshop findings and solutions

Findings	Solutions
• The majority of workers had not received prior training or information regarding heat stress or sun safety	• Given that this is a key risk, training should be done a number of times, particularly as temperatures are reaching 25C, and then touch base regularly once over 30C.
• Workers appreciated learning that heat stress, exhaustion and stroke are conditions that develop on a continuum, and need to be addressed early before they increase in severity and danger	• Make use of OHCOW or other materials and workshops in the language of the worker, and in graphic formats to promote comprehension.
• Most workers identified that they didn't know what to do in the case of a heat stroke emergency.	• Develop, equip and practice an Emergency Plan that includes response to heat illnesses (cooling with water), knowing work locations and communicating to 911

• The majority of workers noted they did not have difficulty accessing enough water during work time.	• Keep up the good work! Ensure potable water is easily available to workers throughout the day. Workers noted that having a centralized water dispenser to refill their individual water bottles helped a lot. • Clarify and demonstrate the best system of water storage and access that fits the work type and location. Encourage drinking beyond thirst.
• A substantial number of workers noted that they had experienced sun burn while working in Ontario. They described sunburns to the back of their neck, face, and arms. • Research in this area notes that often it is assumed that people with darker skin do not get sunburnt, but studies and feedback from workers confirm that some individuals do.	• Review the risks of sun protection, the importance of hats, skin covering work clothes, and the use of sunscreen. • Supply sweat-resistant sunscreen in quantities that allow timely re-application
• Workers noted that they did not feel confident asking to take breaks outside of their allocated time in cases where they felt the heat and sun was negatively affecting them	• Ask regularly how workers are feeling • Discuss what workers should do if they feel as though they need to take breaks during particularly hot days
• The majority of workers noted that there were no easily accessible shaded areas near to where they work to avoid the sun during breaks.	• Rest and Shade are key to recovering during breaks. Plan ahead to set up a tent or tarp, or find other simple ways to provide shade.
• Most workers noted that on particularly hot days supervisors would organize work during the cooler periods of the day, and stop work when temperatures were considered too hot.	• Use time shifting, pace reduction and other work practice control strategies to minimize sun and balance heat exposure. See Humidex-Based Heat Response Plan at www.ohcow.on.ca

For more information about the materials, services and workshops we offer on this topic or others contact

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