

## Working in heat: Know your rights

Dear Member,

With daytime temperatures currently hitting the mid-30s near the coast and into the mid-40s inland, the HSU would like to remind you of your rights regarding working in hot and humid conditions to avoid heat stress.

Heat stress can be experienced in the following ways:

- Heat cramps – painful cramps in muscles, caused by heavy sweating that uses up the body's supply of salt and water.
- Heat exhaustion – weakness, fatigue, dizziness, visual disturbance, feeling of intense thirst and heat, nausea, vomiting, palpitations, tingling and numbness of fingers and/or toes after exposure to a hot environment.
- Heat rash (prickly heat) – an itchy rash of small raised red spots on the face, neck, back, chest and thighs caused by a hot and moist environment.
- Heat stroke – a life threatening condition that requires immediate first aid and medical attention, caused by overexposure to heat and often with dehydration. Symptoms are dry, hot skin, high body temperature (possibly over 41°C) and may include mental confusion which can result in collapse and fitting.
- Worsening of pre-existing illnesses and conditions.

First, if your employer does not do the following already, you can find detailed weather forecasts for your area at <http://www.bom.gov.au/places/nsw/>. This will give you information on expected temperatures, humidity and wind speed. If you click on the 'Detailed 3-Hourly Forecast' section of the web page, it also calculates the apparent temperature, under 'feels like'.

You can then enter this information into WorkCover Queensland's Heat Stress (Basic) Calculator at <https://fswgap.worksafe.qld.gov.au/etools/etool/heat-stress-basic-calculator-test/>, along with other relevant information, to produce a thermal risk assessment.

With this information, employers must plan ahead in a consultative way involving your health and safety representatives (HSRs), to protect you and your workmates. The best approach is to plan for any work requiring physical activity, to be performed early or late in the day, before 11 am and after 3pm. At the beginning of each day working in the heat, you and your workmates must meet with your supervisor to discuss the day's work, weather forecast and what measures will be used to minimise heat stress. These discussions must cover:

- working safely in the heat

- the types of work that increase the risk of heat stress
- how to identify if you, your buddy or your workmates have symptoms of heat stress, and how to report it immediately.

In the heat, you need to drink lots of water to keep hydrated – about 200ml every 20 minutes. It is better to have frequent small drinks of cooled water rather than infrequent large drinks. Your employer must provide this access to water, if you are working away from piped water supplies, bottled water must be supplied. If you are working outside, you must also be provided with SPF 50 rated work wear, a hat, sunscreen and sunglasses.

If, despite all these measures, you experience any of the following warning signs:

- clammy skin;
- confusion;
- light headedness;
- fainting;
- slurred speech;
- nausea;
- fast pulse rate;
- vomiting;
- weakness;
- short temper;
- fatigue;
- loss of concentration;

under the Work Health & Safety Act, you have the right to cease unsafe heat stress-causing work, without losing pay. Tell your supervisor why you have stopped work and ask for safe alternative work. In some circumstances safe alternative work will not be possible – you might then head for an air-conditioned office or vehicle to cool down. To ensure your pay is not docked, do not leave the workplace, unless directed to by your supervisor.

If you know that your employer is not or will not take any proactive measures, then you and your workmates can plan a written cease work action to avoid exposure to unsafe heat stress causing work. Your HSU Organiser can advise you on how best to do this.

There is more information available through Safe Work New South Wales at <https://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/hazards-a-z/working-in-extreme-heat/content-page-blocks/managing-extreme-heat-at-your-workplace>.

In unity,



Gerard Hayes  
Secretary, HSU NSW/ACT/QLD