

## Feeling the Heat?

### Seasonal advice for GMB Safety Representatives

Many people are finding themselves working in uncomfortably hot conditions. It is not uncommon at the height of summer for offices and other workplaces to record temperatures of oppressive +34°C. This is not only tiring and uncomfortable but can cause accidents and in extreme cases lead to heat stress and heat stroke, which can be fatal.

Workers who are doing manual or strenuous work in hot and humid conditions are particularly at risk of heat stress and heat stroke. From an employer's point of view, heat can affect productivity if workers are tired and uncomfortable. People who suffer from heart conditions or breathing problems and pregnant workers may be more vulnerable to high temperatures, particularly if they work outdoors where pollution levels can be higher due to the heat.

In addition to the heat, summer sunshine also brings an additional hazard for outdoor workers. Ultraviolet rays from the sun can cause damage to the skin, including skin cancers such as Melanomas. In the UK, 1, 400 die each year from skin cancer caused by exposure to too much sun.

#### The law and high temperatures

People working indoors are protected from having to work in high temperatures by the *Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992* which state that temperatures within workplaces must be **reasonable**. Unfortunately the Regulations do not give an upper limit for what is reasonable. The Chartered Institute of Building Service Engineers recommends an acceptable limit for most kinds of work of between 16°C and 23°C (60.8°F to 72°F), and this is regarded as best practice by the HSE and GMB. Employers also need to ensure that thermometers are available in the workplace to measure and monitor temperatures.

For people working in environments where there is a hot process e.g. furnaces, and the temperature cannot be reduced, then other steps should be taken to reduce the risk of heat stress amongst workers, including providing regular breaks in a cool area. For outdoor workers there is no specific regulations on temperatures but the *Health and Safety at Work Act 1974* and the *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999* provide some protection against work in high temperatures and the risk of heat stroke and skin damage.

Employers must provide a safe and healthy working environment and carry out a risk assessments to identify hazards such as high temperatures and ultraviolet rays and take steps to reduce the risk of damage to a worker's health.

## Dealing with the Hazard

### Indoor:

- **Provide adequate ventilation and air conditioning** – Fans and open windows may help to circulate air but far more effective is an air conditioning unit. In offices and workplaces without built in air conditioning, portable units should be hired or purchased to cool the air.
- **Shade windows** – blinds should be used to shield the sun from windows.
- **Relax dress code** – employers should relax the dress code and allow staff to wear loose fitting breathable (e.g. cotton) clothing.
- **Welfare** - employers should provide cold drinks and allow regular breaks in comfortable cool areas.

### Outdoor:

- **Clothing and hats** – As a general rule the hotter the day the more covered up you should be. Clothing should be loose fitting and of a close woven fabric.
- **Sunscreen** – high protection sunscreen (minimum factor 15 for fair skin) should be applied regularly. A non-greasy cream would be best for those working in dusty environments. Employers should be pressed to provide sunscreen free of charge.
- **Work in pairs** – where there is a significant risk of heat stress and heat stroke, lone working should be avoided.
- **Plan work** – perform the heaviest work at the coolest part of the day
- **Welfare** - provide access to cold drinks and allow regular breaks in shaded areas (e.g. set up temporary canopies)

### Action Points for Safety Representatives:

- Ensure that your employer has carried out a risk assessment for work in hot weather and has taken the steps detailed above to deal with the hazard.
- Monitor workplace temperatures.
- If your employer refuses to take steps to reduce the risks from work in hot temperatures, contact your Regional Health and Safety Officer.
- Report any complaints of ill health linked to the heat in the accident book.

### Further information:

Feeling the Heat – A GMB guide on summer working is available from your Regional Health and Safety Officer or at [www.gmbunion.org.uk](http://www.gmbunion.org.uk)