



INFO SHEET - MAY 2025

KEEPING IT COOL, KEEPING IT SAFE: ENSURING THE SAFETY AND RIGHTS OF MIGRANT WORKERS DURING BC'S SUMMER MONTHS

During the summer months in BC, rising temperatures increase the risk of heat-related illnesses for workers, especially those in outdoor roles such as construction and farm work. Newcomers may be unfamiliar with the health risks associated with working in hot conditions or with their rights to a safe workplace. This info sheet is designed for service provider organizations (SPOs) supporting newcomer clients who are employed in outdoor environments during warm weather. It provides essential information and terminology related to heat stress, outlines worker rights and employer responsibilities, and offers guidance on how to recognize heat-related symptoms and respond appropriately. This resource also includes details on how and when clients can report unsafe conditions to WorkSafeBC. SPOs can use this tool to help clients understand how to protect themselves and ensure their safety is prioritized on the job, regardless of immigration status or length of time in Canada.

ABOUT WORKSAFEBC

WorkSafeBC is British Columbia's provincial agency dedicated to ensuring the safety and health of BC workers and their workplaces. This agency is committed to conveying critical information and support to workers and employers to save lives and prevent work-related injuries, diseases, and disabilities. In the event that workers and/or their employers encounter any of these events, WorkSafeBC provides insurance and partners with health care providers in order to help workers recover and safely return to work. In terms of their support to employers, WorkSafeBC ensures that workplaces comply with provincial Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) regulations, as well as the BC Workers Compensation Act.

WorkSafeBC has published a range of resources to help employers and workers understand the risks of heat stress and their rights regarding heat-related conditions and mitigation strategies. AMSSA is grateful for WorkSafeBC's contributions, which have played a significant role in the creation of this info sheet. This resource builds upon previous materials from AMSSA's ongoing WorkSafeBC-funded project. For more information and links to relevant WorkSafeBC articles, see the "Additional Resources" section.

KEY TERMS

When assessing the safety of clients during heat episodes or advising them on staying safe in the workplace, consider the following key terms:

Heat Stress

- Heat stress is physical strain on the body caused by exposure to high temperatures.
- It is influenced by environmental conditions, the intensity of work, and individual health factors.
- Outdoor work increases risk due to direct sunlight and UV exposure.
- Indoor environments can also be hazardous if there is poor ventilation, heat-producing equipment, or inadequate cooling.
- Rising summer temperatures can intensify existing heat levels in workplaces.
- Physically demanding work raises the body's internal temperature, worsening heat stress.
- Individual factors such as hydration, physical fitness, medical conditions, and medications impact a person's heat tolerance.

Heat Rash

- Heat rash causes small red bumps on the skin when sweat glands become blocked in hot and humid conditions.
- It can be relieved by changing into dry clothes, avoiding further heat exposure, and rinsing the skin with cool water.

Heat Cramps

- Heat cramps are painful muscle spasms, usually in the legs or abdomen, caused by heavy sweating and electrolyte loss.
- These cramps are often an early warning sign of a more serious heat-related condition.
- Treatment includes resting in a cool area, loosening clothing, stretching and massaging the muscles, and drinking cool, lightly salted fluids.
- Salt tablets should be avoided, as they may worsen symptoms.



Heat Exhaustion

- Heat exhaustion is a serious condition marked by shallow breathing, rapid heartbeat, weak pulse, cool and clammy skin, fatigue, dizziness, headache, nausea, fainting, blurred vision, and possibly muscle cramps.
- A body temperature above 38°C is a key sign of this condition.
- To treat heat exhaustion, move the person to a cooler area, loosen tight clothing, apply cool water to the skin, and provide non-caffeinated fluids.
- If symptoms persist or worsen, seek medical help immediately.

Heat Stroke (Medical Emergency)

- Heat stroke is the most severe heat-related illness and requires immediate medical attention.
- Symptoms include hot, dry, and flushed skin; lack of sweating; confusion or unconsciousness; headache; nausea; vomiting; seizures; rapid breathing; irregular pulse; shock; and potential cardiac arrest.
- Call emergency services (911) right away if heat stroke is suspected.
- While waiting, move the person to a cool place, remove excess clothing, and cool the body with cold water and fanning.
- If the person is alert and not nauseated, offer small sips of non-caffeinated fluids.
- Continue cooling measures during transport to a medical facility.

BACKGROUND AND STATISTICS ON HEAT-RELATED EVENTS

Extreme heat events have become increasingly common across British Columbia due to the intensifying impacts of climate change. The rise in extreme heat temperatures across the province has prompted health and safety authorities to reinforce preventative measures in both indoor and outdoor workplaces. In response, WorkSafeBC has consistently issued advisories urging employers to prepare in advance of the summer months.¹

In 2021, BC experienced a record-setting heat dome that brought extreme temperatures across the province. As a result, WorkSafeBC accepted 115 claims from workers related to heat stress—a 180 percent increase over the average of 41 claims in the previous three years.² This number remained elevated in 2022 with 81 claims.³ Certain populations—such as outdoor workers, those in enclosed or poorly ventilated indoor spaces, and vulnerable groups such as newcomers, seniors, or individuals with pre-existing health conditions—are particularly at risk.⁴ Many of these individuals also work in roles that may lack protections such as cooling systems, rest periods, or adequate hydration. Furthermore, indoor heat stress is an area of increasing concern with over one-third (35%) of heat stress claims being from indoor workers.⁵

SIGNS AND RISKS OF HEAT STRESS IN WORKERS

Heat stress is a significant occupational hazard, especially in environments with high temperature exposure, closed spaces, and/or strenuous physical activity. For workers with preexisting health conditions, lack of hydration, strenuous physical work activities, or fatigue the health impacts of heat stress can be dangerous.⁶ With the higher temperatures accompanying BC's upcoming summer months, the risk of heat stress on workers will increase and is especially important for employers to consider when keeping their employees safe.

Heat stress poses such a significant risk to workers because it can lead to various heat-related illnesses, each with distinct signs and symptoms that require prompt recognition and response to prevent serious health outcomes. Early indicators of heat stress include cramps, excessive sweating, dizziness, nausea, headaches, and fainting.⁷ These symptoms suggest the body's struggle to regulate its internal temperature and can escalate if not addressed promptly. As a result of heat stress, illnesses such as heat cramps, heat stroke, or heat exhaustion can set in. To understand these illnesses and ways to treat them, please refer to the “key terms” section at the start of this info sheet.

It is important to note that heat stress illnesses can be prevented through proper precautions, such as reducing worker activity levels during heat events, reducing heat exposure, drinking fluids regularly, and by actively monitoring workers for abnormal behaviour or other early signs of heat stress and ensuring that prompt corrective action is taken at the first indication of symptoms.

RIGHTS OF WORKERS AND DUTIES OF EMPLOYERS DURING HEAT EPISODES

Rights of workers

All workers in British Columbia have the right to a safe and healthy workplace. This includes protection from hazards such as extreme heat and harmful UV radiation. Employers are required to provide training and information about these risks so that workers understand how to stay safe on the job.

To protect themselves during heat events, workers should take the following precautions⁸:

- Stay hydrated throughout the day.
- Wear breathable, lightweight clothing and apply sunscreen.
- Take regular breaks in shaded or cool areas.
- Plan physically demanding tasks during cooler parts of the day (before 11 a.m. or after 3 p.m.).
- Be mindful of personal risk factors such as medications, chronic conditions, or lack of acclimatization.
- Monitor themselves and coworkers for signs of heat stress.

If a worker believes that conditions on the job site are dangerously hot and could cause harm, they have the **legal right to refuse unsafe work** under the Workers Compensation Act.⁹ This process involves the following steps¹⁰:

- **Stop the work** and immediately report the concern to your supervisor or employer.
- **The employer must investigate** the concern and take steps to eliminate or reduce the hazard.
- **If the worker is not satisfied with the outcome**, they can request that a **worker representative, joint health and safety committee member, or another knowledgeable worker** be present for a second investigation.
- **If the issue is still not resolved**, the worker and employer must **contact WorkSafeBC** for further guidance and possible inspection.
- **While the concern is being investigated**, the employer may assign the worker **temporary alternative duties with no loss of pay**.
- **Workers are protected** from discipline or retaliation when they follow the proper process for refusing unsafe work.

Understanding and exercising these rights can help prevent serious heat-related illnesses and create a safer working environment for everyone.

¹ <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/about-us/news-events/campaigns/2024/june/protecting-workers-from-wildfire-smoke-heat-stress>

^{2,3} <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/about-us/news-events/news-releases/2023/july/worksafebc-reminds-employers-to-protect-indoor-and-outdoor-workers-from-the-risk-of-heat-stress>

⁴ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-management/preparedbc/know-your-hazards/severe-weather/extreme-heat>

⁵ <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/about-us/news-events/news-releases/2022/july/worksafebc-reminding-employers-to-keep-both-indoor-and-outdoor-workers-safe-from-heat-stress>

⁶ <https://www.ontario.ca/page/managing-heat-stress-work>

⁷ <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/resources/health-safety/books-guides/preventing-heat-stress-at-work?lang=en&origin=s&returnurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.worksafebc.com%2Fen%2Fforms-resources%23sort%3DRelevancy%26q%3Dheat%26f%3Atopic-facet%3D%5BHealth%2520%2526%2520Safety%5D&highlight=heat>

^{8,10} <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/resources/about-us/news-and-events/backgrounders/heat-stress-uv-exposure?lang=en>

⁹ https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/19001_00

Duties of employers

Employers must proactively address heat and UV risks by conducting a risk assessment and creating an exposure control plan before hot weather arrives. Employers should develop daily safe work plans, engage workers in discussions about heat stress, and involve them in risk assessments and mitigation strategies, as part of training and information offered to the workers. Employers must monitor environmental conditions, adapt work practices as needed, and implement physical modifications to reduce radiant heat. Additional measures include scheduling job rotations and rest breaks, providing shaded cooling areas with water, ensuring first-aid readiness, and supplying protective clothing and sunscreen for outdoor workers to minimize UV exposure.¹¹

HOW TO HELP NEWCOMER WORKERS BRING A CASE TO WORKSAFEBC

It's important that SPOs help newcomer workers understand their **right to refuse unsafe work** under WorkSafeBC regulations. Below is the step-by-step process to follow:

1. Stop the unsafe work

If a worker believes that a task is unsafe, they should stop the work immediately.

2. Report the concern

The worker must report the hazard or unsafe condition to their supervisor or employer as soon as possible.

3. Employer investigates

The employer must investigate the concern and either resolve the issue or explain why they believe the work is safe to continue.

4. Request a second investigation (if needed)

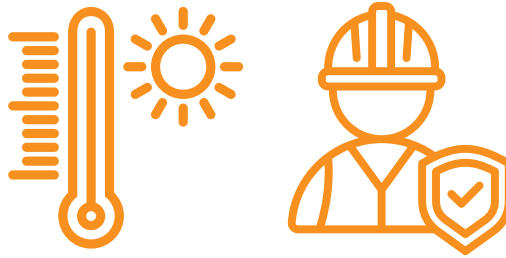
If the worker is not satisfied with the employer's response, they can request a second investigation. This must involve

- Worker representative,
- Joint health and safety committee member
- Union representative, or
- Another knowledgeable worker (as appropriate to the workplace).

5. Contact WorkSafeBC

If the issue remains unresolved after the second investigation, the worker and employer must contact WorkSafeBC for assistance:

604-276-3100 or **1-888-621-SAFE (7233)**



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- WorkSafeBC Preventing Heat Stress at Work: <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/resources/health-safety/books-guides/preventing-heat-stress-at-work?lang=en>
- AMSSA E-Learning Course: Introduction to WorkSafeBC for Migrant Worker Support Staff: <https://www.amssa.org/resource/introduction-to-worksafebc-for-migrant-worker-support-staff/>
- AMSSA Virtual Information Session: Supporting Newcomers During Climate Emergencies: <https://www.amssa.org/resource/supporting-newcomers-during-climate-emergencies/>
- AMSSA and WorkSafeBC Info Sheet: Climate Related Events at a Workplace and WorkSafeBC's Role: <https://www.amssa.org/resource/climate-related-events-worksafebc/>
- WorkSafeBC Heat Stress Screening Tool: <https://www.worksafebc.com/heat-stress-screening-tool/>
- Ontario Government: Managing heat stress at work: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/managing-heat-stress-work>

¹¹ <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/resources/about-us/news-and-events/backgrounders/heat-stress-uv-exposure?lang=en>