



Working in the summer on many agricultural jobs can be taxing. Between the heat and humidity to the bugs swarming, every worker must remember the seasonal hazards that can affect their normal work production. This month's Safety Alert shares with you a few hazards that you will encounter and provides tips on how to best mitigate those hazards.

## **Summer Safety Hazards**

### **Hazard #1: Heat-Related Illnesses**

"Heat stress" is a blanket term for a handful of heat-related illnesses that can have a serious impact on the health of workers.

The most common of these are heat rashes and heat cramps, both of which generally occur due to excessive sweating in hot, humid conditions. Heat rash (also known as prickly heat) is characterized by small red bumps on the skin, while heat cramps are painful, involuntary muscle contractions that may be a symptom of heat exhaustion.

Heat exhaustion is more serious than rashes or cramps and happens when the body loses too much water and salt from sweating. It often affects workers who are carrying out strenuous work in high temperatures with high humidity. Left untreated, it may lead to heat stroke.

Heat stroke is the most serious of all heat-related illnesses and should always be treated as a medical emergency. It happens when the body is no longer able to control its core temperature or cool itself down.

### **Safety Tips:**

1. Provide workers with water at all job sites. Ensure workers hydrate before, during, and after work to prevent heat illness.
2. Modify work schedules. Monitor temperatures throughout the day and modify work schedules to limit strenuous activity during peak hours from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Also allow frequent rest periods with water breaks in shaded or air-conditioned areas.
3. Avoid clothing that traps heat. Choose lightweight, light-colored, breathable, loose-fitting clothing if possible. Carry spare shirts to replace wet or sweaty shirts.
4. Wear cooling gear, such as wet neck towels or gel-filled cooling neck scarves or vests to keep body heat down.
5. Consider air conditioning in a nearby room where workers can cool down.
6. Slowly acclimate new or returning workers to the environment. Their bodies need time to adapt to working in the heat.
7. Educate workers on the signs of heat-related illness.

## **Hazard #2: Sun Exposure**

Not to be confused with exposure to heat, direct exposure to the hot summer sun and its strong ultraviolet (UV) rays poses their own hazards to workers. The main short-term effect from extended sun exposure is sunburns, which can range from a mild reddening of the skin to more serious burns that blister and peel. It can also contribute to fatigue and dehydration. In the long-term, workers may experience leathery and wrinkled skin and an increased risk of skin cancer, which can be deadly. Despite being almost entirely preventable, the American Academy of Dermatology estimates that more than 8,500 people in the U.S. are diagnosed with skin cancer every day.

### **Safety Tips:**

1. When possible, wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants for protection from UV rays.
2. Wear a hat with a brim all the way around that shades the face, ears, and back of the neck.
3. Wear UVA- and UVB-blocking sunglasses to protect eyes from UV rays and reduce the risk of cataracts.
4. Always use a broad-spectrum sunscreen (minimum sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or above) when working outside, even on cloudy or cool days. Apply 20 minutes before heading outdoors and reapply every 2 to 3 hours.
5. Whenever possible, allow for breaks in shaded areas.
6. Get regular skin checks by a doctor to help detect any unusual skin changes that could lead to skin cancer diagnoses.

## **Hazard #3: Poisonous Plants**

Poison ivy, oak, and sumac have poisonous oils in their roots, stems, leaves, and fruits. These oils can get on the skin by direct contact with the plant or by contact with contaminated objects such as clothing, shoes, tools, and animals. Symptoms can include red rashes within a few days of contact, swelling, itching, or possible bumps, patches, streaking, or weeping blisters. Burning these plants can also produce a smoke that, when inhaled, can cause lung irritation.

### **Safety Tips:**

1. Educate workers on the identification, signs, and symptoms of poison ivy, oak, and sumac plants.
2. Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants that are tucked into boots.
3. Wear cloth or leather gloves.
4. Apply barrier creams to exposed skin.
5. Keep rubbing alcohol accessible, as it removes the oil up to 30 minutes after exposure.
6. If infected, apply wet compresses, calamine lotion, or hydrocortisone cream to reduce itching or blistering.
7. Call 911 or go to a hospital emergency room with a severe allergic reaction such as swelling or difficulty breathing.

## **Hazard #4: Ticks and Mosquitoes**

It is not just the plants that can be a hazard, ticks and mosquitoes can carry bacteria, parasites, or viruses. One of the most common tick-borne diseases in the U.S. is Lyme disease. The most common disease carried by mosquitoes is the West Nile virus infection. Symptoms of these diseases include body/muscle aches, fever, headaches, fatigue, joint pain, rash, stiff neck, and paralysis.

### **Safety Tips:**

1. To decrease tick populations: remove leaf litter and remove, mow, or cut back tall grass.
2. Wash and dry work clothes using “hot” settings to kill any ticks present.
3. Wear a hat and light-colored clothing to easily spot ticks; check skin/clothing daily.
4. To remove an attached tick, grasp with tweezers as close as possible to the skin site, and pull upward and out with firm and steady pressure.
5. To decrease mosquito populations: eliminate standing water, remove debris from ditches, and place drain holes in containers that collect standing water.
6. Keep long-sleeved shirts and pants tucked into boots or socks.
7. Use Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved bug spray with one of the following active ingredients: DEET (20-30% strength), picaridin, IR3535, and oil of lemon eucalyptus or para-menthane-diol. Do not use DEET on infants.

The changing season brings a host of new safety challenges to outdoor workers. By identifying and understanding the hazards and taking steps to manage the risk, you can ensure your workers remain safe, healthy, and productive throughout the summer months.

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