



Know the warning signs for heat and sun

Letter carriers work long hours outdoors, so when summer arrives, we all need to remember to protect ourselves from the dangers associated with heat and sun.

This begins with understanding the potential risks, taking proactive steps to avoid problems related to exposure to heat or sun, knowing the signs of trouble and being aware of what to do if the heat begins to impair you.

“You work alone most of the day, so you have to take responsibility for your own safety, and you have to think about it before you go outside,” NALC Director of Safety and Health Manuel L. Peralta Jr. said. “Your health is the No. 1 priority—do what you need to do to work outside safely in the summer.”

Surviving heat isn’t just about being in shape and it’s certainly not about toughing it out. You must take care of your body’s needs and prepare in advance. All carriers must be wary of extreme heat. Knowing how to prevent heat stress is key to keeping a letter carrier safe on a hot day.

That starts with water. Hydration is essential to the body’s natural cooling process. Drinking plenty of H₂O, long before you leave the office, is the first step in heat safety. Continue to drink about 8 ounces every 15 minutes while in the heat and even afterward to replace vital body fluids. Check with your doctor on the best way to replenish your electrolytes.

Another essential part of surviving the heat is dressing for the weather. Wear loose-fitting, breathable clothing to allow your skin to cool itself. Choose light-colored fabric because it reflects more sun and keeps you cooler. The old-fashioned pith helmet—now a white plastic hat—will also help deflect the heat from your head.

On your route, look for shade where you can find it. Carriers who work in hot, sunny climates often make a mental note of the available shade on their routes to help reduce exposure to the hot sun, especially in the middle of the day.

Even if you take all of these precautions, heat stress can catch up with you, so know the signs. You should be prepared to recognize the two kinds of severe heat stress:

Heat exhaustion symptoms include headache, nausea, dizziness, weakness, thirst and heavy sweating. You should call for medical help before this becomes a heat stroke.

Heat stroke is the most serious heat-related illness and requires immediate medical attention. Call 911 immediately and, if possible, have someone contact your supervisor. Do not wait for your supervisor’s approval to call 911. Symptoms include confusion; fainting; seizures, very high body temperature; hot, dry skin; and profuse sweating. The visible signs of heat stroke are red, hot, dry skin, or excessive sweating, seizures and fainting.

Take action immediately when you recognize the signs of heat exhaustion or heat stroke, whether in yourself or in a colleague. Find shade or a cool place indoors, drink water, and call 911 immediately. Then notify your supervisor if you can.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) have jointly developed a heat safety tool app for your smartphone. Once the app is installed, it can detect your location and provide you with the current temperature, humidity and heat index—the combination of temperature and humidity that

tells you how hard it will be for your body to cool itself. The app also will provide the expected heat index—for the balance of the workday.

The sun has more than one way to harm you. Even when the air isn’t hot, sunlight can severely damage your skin. Letter carriers should take precautions daily to minimize the risk of both sunburn and long-term skin damage from cumulative exposure to the sun’s rays—even on cool or cloudy days.

“Sun damage is both short term and long term,” Peralta said. “The short-term damage is sunburn. But even if you don’t burn, long-term exposure to the sun can bring skin damage and a risk of skin cancer.”

Use a strong sunscreen, even on cloudy days, on all exposed skin, and reapply as needed. Consider the sun protection factor (SPF) of the sunscreen you use. SPF is a multiplier of how long the sunscreen allows you to go in the sun without burning. For example, on a sunny day when you might suffer a sunburn in 15 minutes with no protection, a sunscreen rated at SPF 10 would protect you for 150 minutes—as long as sweat doesn’t wash it away sooner. Because it wears off, even without sweat, in two hours or so, carry sunscreen with you and reapply as needed.

When you can, wear appropriate clothes to cover as much of your skin as possible. Remember that the sun’s rays can go through some types of fabric, so consider wearing uniform items made for sun protection and applying sunscreen under a shirt or hat just to be safe.

“Keep your cool this summer,” Peralta said, “so you can stay safe and healthy.” **PR**