

Preparing for the heat of summer



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In February of 2016, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) issued a report titled “Criteria for a Recommended Standard – Occupational Exposure to Heat and Hot Environments” (NIOSH Publication 2016-106). In the foreword, NIOSH Director John Howard, MD, explains that this update takes into account the new scientific information acquired since the last revision in 1986. The report makes reference to and highlights other publications on heat safety.

NIOSH Publication 2013-143 titled “Preventing Heat Related Illness or Death of Outdoor Workers” presents

examples of other factors that may contribute to heat illness. It highlights one case in which an outdoor worker who died from the heat was on medication that had a warning about exposure to heat, and it offers that the medication could have possibly interfered with body temperature regulation.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends that reading the product label is the most important part of taking care of yourself or your family when using over-the-counter (OTC) medicines (available without a prescription). This is especially true because many OTC medicines are taken without first seeing a doctor about them.

Furthermore, if your physician prescribes you any medication, we encourage you to discuss how the medication might affect you while performing your letter carrier duties in extreme heat. In some cases, your doctor may want to limit your exposure to the heat while you are on the medication. If so, have your doctor provide you with these directions in writing so that you can protect yourself from unlightened managers who would put you in harm’s way just to make budget.

We need your help to protect you from harm, so communicate with your local union leadership, your national business agent or, if necessary, by contacting our office.

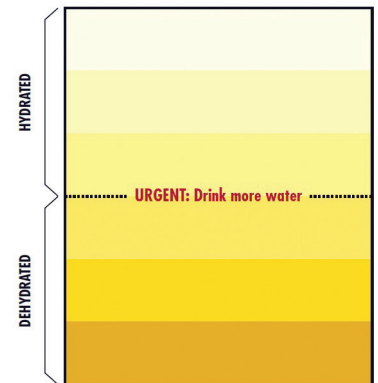
In the final paragraph on the executive summary in NIOSH Publication 2016-106, you will find the following recommendation:

Employers should have an acclimatization plan for new and returning workers, because lack of acclimatization has been shown to be a major factor associated with worker heat-related illness and death. NIOSH recommends that employers provide the means for appropriate hydration and encourage their workers to hydrate themselves with potable

water <15°C (59°F) made accessible near the work area. Workers in heat <2 hours and involved in moderate work activities should drink 1 cup (8 oz.) of water every 15-20 minutes, but during prolonged sweating lasting several hours, they should drink sports drinks containing balanced electrolytes. In addition, employers should implement a work/rest schedule and provide a cool area (e.g., air-conditioned or shaded) for workers to rest and recover. These elements are intended to protect the health of workers from heat stress in a variety of hot environments.

Are you drinking enough water? On page 154 of Publication 2016-106, you will find the “Urine Color Chart—Are you hydrated?” The chart (also shown at right) expresses the urgency to drink more water if the color of your urine appears to be in the dehydrated range.

Urine Color Chart
Are you hydrated?



OSHA citations in heat-related illnesses

The publication goes on to share the following:

A study of OSHA citations issued between 2012 and 2013 revealed 20 cases of heat-related illness or death of workers [Arbury et al. 2014]. In most of these cases, employers had no program to prevent heat illness, or programs were deficient; and acclimatization was the program element most commonly missing and most clearly associated with worker death.

Has your office established a program to prevent heat illness? Or does your supervisor read off a sheet of paper indicating something to the effect of, “Stay hydrated...be careful out there,” and then follow it up with a warning that you had best not take any additional time on the street?

OSHA observed, following their investigation of the July 2012 tragic death of letter carrier John Watzlawick, that management was capable of behavior such as the above (see the Safety and Health columns from the April 2013, November 2014 and May 2015 issues of *The Postal Record*).

Are you prepared? Keep a close eye on each other.