

# Know the warning signs for heat and sun

**W**e work outdoors most of the day, and in the summer, that means exposure to the dangers of heat and sun.

Now that summer is in full swing, letter carriers should take responsibility for their own outdoor safety by taking proactive steps to avoid danger, knowing the signs of trouble and being prepared for it.

“Don’t wait until it is too late to protect yourself from heat and sun,” NALC Director of Safety and Health Manuel L. Peralta Jr. said. “Do what you need to do to work outside in summer.”

## Heat happens

Even the most seasoned carrier must be wary of extreme heat. Being in top physical shape isn’t enough—it’s knowing how to prevent heat stress that keeps a letter carrier safe on a hot day.

That starts with hydration. Water is essential to the body’s natural cooling process, so drinking copious amounts of H<sub>2</sub>O, starting before you leave the office, is the first step in heat safety. Continue to drink while on your route and even afterward to replace vital body fluids.

Be sure to dress appropriately for the weather. On warm days, wear light-colored, loose-fitting, breathable clothing. The light colors reflect more sun and the loose fit and breathable fabric let heat escape the skin faster.

Find shade wherever you can. Carriers who work in hot, sunny climates often make a mental shade map of their routes to avoid prolonged exposure to the hot sun, especially in the middle of the day.

Know the signs of heat stress. Even if you take all the precautions, your body may succumb to severe heat stress. You should be prepared to recognize

the signs of the two kinds of severe heat stress:

- **Heat exhaustion** symptoms include headache, nausea, dizziness, weakness, thirst and heavy sweating. It can turn into heat stroke quickly if immediate action is not taken.
- **Heat stroke** is the most serious heat-related illness and requires immediate medical attention. Symptoms include: confusion, fainting, seizures, very high body temperature, and hot, dry skin or profuse sweating. The visible signs of heat stroke are red, hot, dry skin, or excessive sweating, seizures and fainting.

Don’t hesitate to take action if you see the signs of heat stress in yourself or a colleague. Find shade or a cool place indoors, drink water, and notify your supervisor or call 911 if necessary.

A useful tool for workers dealing with heat is available right on your smartphone. Simply download and install the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)’s Heat Safety Tool Smartphone App. Once the app is installed, it can detect your location and provide you with the current temperature, humidity and heat index (combination of temperature and humidity). It also will provide the expected heat index for the balance of the workday.

## Sun exposure

Even if you keep your body cool, the sun can damage your skin.

“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.”

To minimize the risk of both sunburn and long-term skin damage from cumulative exposure to the sun’s rays—a major risk for letter carriers outside—take precautions daily.

Use a strong sunscreen, even on cloudy days, and reapply as needed. Look at the sun protection factor (SPF)—it’s a multiplier of how long it allows you to be in the sun without burning. For example, on a sunny day when you might burn in 15 minutes, a sunscreen rated at SPF-10 would protect you for 150 minutes—as long as sweat doesn’t wash it away, of course.

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 applying sunscreen under a shirt or hat just to be safe.

“Stay safe and healthy this summer,” Peralta said, “by keeping your cool.” **PR**