

Help on the way



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Letter carriers are amazing. Five months into the coronavirus pandemic, and the mail keeps getting delivered. While most of the country has been sheltering in place, you have kept America connected. Your steady work has been nothing short of amazing, inspiring and humbling. Thanks.

As I write this, more than 1,400 letter carriers have tested positive for the novel coronavirus. Most have recovered and returned to work; many have been hospitalized; 14 carriers have died.

NALC has ramped up our efforts to help every letter carrier with work-related COVID-19 diagnoses file claims with the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP). Your regional workers' compensation assistants (RWCAs) and a handful of letter carriers with experience in OWCP claim filing have been reaching out to infected letter carriers.

We have been assisting letter carriers with registering and filing claims in ECOMP, OWCP's electronic claim filing system. We have been helping letter carriers develop their work narratives so they can educate doctors about how much contact they have with co-workers and customers in a typical day. And we have been educating doctors on what medical evidence is needed to file a successful claim.

If you were infected with the coronavirus, believe you contacted the virus at work and have not filed a claim, you might consider doing so. Like any new illness, the full range of long-term effects caused by COVID-19 remain unknown. Almost weekly, the doctors, pathologists and epidemiologists studying the coronavirus find new maladies associated with the virus.

If your infection was mild and seems to have gone away, you might not be inclined to file a claim. Should you suffer symptoms in the future and want to file a claim, it could be difficult getting a claim accepted. If you have not been contacted by NALC, please call your national business agent's office; we will make every effort to help you. We will not stop until every letter carrier gets the help he or she needs.

While exposure to the coronavirus continues to be a daily concern, another epidemic is occurring with regularity: heat injuries.

As the warmest months begin, letter carriers' exposure to higher temperatures while delivering mail increases.

In Fiscal Year 2019, the Postal Service reported 571 heat-related injuries, 294 of which were considered non-recordable with no lost time. There were 277 serious enough that letter carriers lost time from work. Some heat-related injuries resulted in hospitalization; some letter carriers have yet to recover.

The Postal Service has procedures that must be followed for employees suffering heat injuries. Yet many supervisors have little knowledge of those procedures and all too often fail to follow those procedures, putting letter carriers at risk.

There are some guidelines that can prevent heat injuries: The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) recommends that employers provide the means for appropriate hydration and encourage workers to hydrate themselves. Letter carriers working in a hot environment for more than two hours should drink one cup (8 ounces) of water every 15 to 20 minutes. During the course of carrying your route, where you may have prolonged sweating lasting several hours, it is recommended you drink beverages containing balanced electrolytes, such as sports drinks.

Additionally, NIOSH suggests that employers implement a work/rest schedule and provide a cool area (e.g., air-conditioned or shaded) for workers to rest and recover. As letter carriers, we know that finding a cool area on the street or in our vehicles may be impossible. Do not let that stop you from retreating to a cooler environment on the route or back in the office.

Heat injuries can occur even when you have been appropriately hydrated and have rested as needed. Letter carriers should be mindful of the cascading effects of heat exposure, which can lead to extreme muscle fatigue, dehydration and lack of mental awareness.

It is vital that anyone suffering from a heat injury get the best care available as soon as possible. Relying on a neighborhood urgent care clinic to correctly diagnose and treat a heat injury is rarely sufficient. It is important that you see your primary care doctor. OWCP will not accept medical reports from physician's assistants or nurse practitioners without a doctor's signature.

Swiftly returning to work after a heat-related injury is problematic for letter carriers. Many doctors are unaware of letter carrier work duties and the demands to meet Postal Service expectations. The effects of heat injuries often linger well past the point where internal temperatures have become normal. Severe heat-related illness may cause permanent damage to a person's organs, such as the heart, kidneys and liver, which may result in a chronic disorder.

NIOSH suggests that employers have an acclimatization plan for new and returning workers. Lack of acclimatization has been shown to be a major factor associated with heat-related illness and death. In other words, don't rush back to work if you continue to feel the effects of a heat injury.

Protect yourselves, be prepared for heat exposure. This is an epidemic we can stop.