

Compensation claims for heat and sun exposure



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Three years ago, on a hot and sunny day in June, a new letter carrier on his first day delivering mail was in trouble. His supervisor noticed that the letter carrier had not progressed much on the route and drove out to check on him. According to the supervisor, the letter carrier was disoriented and unsure of where he was. The supervisor pointed the letter carrier in the right direction and went back to the office.

A few hours later, the supervisor saw that the letter carrier was stationary and on the wrong route. Once again, the supervisor went to check on him. He found the letter carrier unconscious and unresponsive. Paramedics were called. The letter carrier was taken to the emergency room, where he was declared dead. The paramedics noted that the letter carrier's body temperature was 103 degrees.

The carrier had had a 20-year career in the Navy prior to becoming a letter carrier. He left behind a wife and an 8-year-old daughter.

There are many disturbing aspects about this incident, and we may never know everything that could and should have been done to prevent this untimely death. One thing appears to be clear: The new employee was exposed to seasonably high temperatures and sunshine, which contributed to the fatal outcome.

With another summer upon us, many letter carriers are being exposed to long-term heat and sun exposure. In Fiscal Year 2020, there were 442 heat-related injuries reported by the Postal Service. That's a disturbingly high number.

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), most heat-related fatalities occur in the first few days of working in warm or hot environments, because the body needs to build a tolerance to the heat gradually over time. The process of building tolerance is called heat acclimatization. Lack of acclimatization represents a major risk factor for fatal outcomes.

In many of the heat-injury cases involving letter carriers, the worker thought that they had taken the necessary precautions, prior to heading out on the route, by carrying ample water. While maintaining adequate hydration is important, heat injuries can slowly creep up on you. Working in full sunlight can increase heat index values by 15 degrees Fahrenheit. As the body slowly overheats, judgment can be impaired. Before you know it, you're in trouble.

During heat waves, you may experience a combination of two kinds of heat-related illness. Exertional heat illness (metabolic heat generated by muscle activity

in the body) results primarily from the type of exertion common to the physicality of letter carrier work. Environmental heat illness is attributed primarily to ambient conditions, including heat, relative humidity and sun exposure, and is related to heat waves, urban heat islands and hot motor vehicles.

Letter carriers who suffer heat injuries while delivering mail should seek immediate medical attention, preferably in a hospital emergency room. Privately run urgent care centers are often ill-equipped to provide the treatment needed for heat-related injuries.

The injured worker also should file a claim for the heat injury with the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP). There are a range of heat-related symptoms that can affect anyone, regardless of age or physical condition. A doctor needs to list all of the additional injuries consequential to the overheating, which often include heart and kidney malfunction.

Sun exposure

As letter carriers, we spend a lot of time outdoors exposed to the sun. Sunlight contains ultraviolet (UV) radiation, which can cause premature aging of the skin, cataracts and skin cancer. There are no such things as safe UV rays or safe suntans.

OSHA recommends the following measures to limit sun exposure:

- Cover up. Wear loose-fitting, long-sleeved shirts and long pants.
- Use sunscreen with a sun protection factor of at least 30. Be sure to follow application directions on the bottle or tube.
- Wear a hat. A wide brim hat, not a baseball cap, works best because it protects the neck, ears, eyes, forehead, nose and scalp.
- Wear UV-absorbent sunglasses (eye protection). Sunglasses don't have to be expensive, but they should block 99 to 100 percent of UVA and UVB radiation. Before you buy sunglasses, read the product tag or label.
- Limit exposure. UV rays are most intense between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.

Letter carriers who have injuries related to sun exposure also can file claims with OWCP. Claims for skin cancer will likely be occupational disease claims filed using form CA-2. You can find step-by-step instructions on how to file occupational disease claims on the "Injured on the Job" page at nalc.org. Letter carriers with accepted skin disease claims also can file for a schedule award. You also can find information on filing schedule award claims on the "Injured on the Job" page at nalc.org.

Be safe, cover up and avoid getting overheated so you can enjoy the summer!