Introduction

Employers have a legal duty under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 to assess and manage risks to worker's health and safety. Heatwaves are becoming more frequent in the UK, increasing the risk of heat-related illness and reduced workplace performance. ***Employers should take a proactive approach to the protection the health and wellbeing of workers before and during heatwaves***.

This guidance provides practical recommendations to help employers and workers reduce the risk of heat-related illness during periods of hot weather.

Key messages
✓ **Treat heat as an occupational health hazard.**
✓ **Carry out heat risk assessments.**
✓ **Ensure access to cool drinking water.**
✓ **Modify work schedules during heatwaves.**
✓ **Increase rest breaks.**
✓ **Identify workers at increased risk.**
✓ **Train staff to recognise heat-related illness.**

Impact of extreme heat on health

Exposure to high temperatures, especially without protective measures, affects the health, wellbeing, and safety of workers.[1] [2] This reduces workplace productivity. Although, there is no legal maximum workplace temperature environment in the UK, employers have a legal duty under Section 2 of the Health and Safety Work Act 1974 to risk assess factors that could impact workers' health and safety. Extreme heat also impacts on fatigue, cognitive performance, decision making and safety incidents.

The UK Health Security Agency reported 1,504 heat-related deaths in the summer of 2025 in England.[2] It is important for employers and employees alike to recognise symptoms of heat-related illness and what steps to take if they occur within the workplace. See annex 1 - recognising heat-related illness and injuries.

Recommendations for employers:

Undertake a heat risk assessment.

- Employers should risk assess whether worker's health and wellbeing are protected during extreme heat events. Risk assessment should consider factors such as ventilation, availability of drinking water, duration of exposure to heat or direct sunlight, physical workload, potentially vulnerable employees and air temperature and humidity.
- Employers should ensure that first aid training covers a response to heat-related illnesses and injuries.
- Review arrangements in alignment with heat-related weather warning issued by the Met Office.

Keep workplaces cool.

- Employers should monitor workplace temperatures and conditions by providing effective mechanical ventilation and increasing opportunities for natural ventilation

[1] Petkova et al, 2014. Health Impacts of Heat in a Changing Climate: How Can Emerging Science Inform Urban Adaptation Planning? Current Epidemiology Reports [Internet]. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4240518/
[2] UK Health Security Alliance. Heat mortality monitoring report, England: 2025 [Internet]. GOV.UK. 2026.

where appropriate. For example, make sure windows can be opened. Employers could also reduce unnecessary heat-generating equipment.
- Employers should maintain cooling systems to ensure that they are efficient and safe to use.
- For outdoor working environments, encourage working under shade and avoid working under the sun between 11am and 3pm.

Provide drinking water.
- Encourage regular hydration by providing free access to cool drinking water and encourage frequent sips, consider introducing hydration breaks.

Modify work schedules.
- Rescheduling of work, especially physically demanding work, to cooler parts of the day. Employers could increase the frequency of rest breaks.
- Allowing employees to work from home where possible to reduce unnecessary travel.
- Build shade/cooling into shift planning (shade structures, fans, air-conditioned rest areas)

Provide appropriate PPE.
- Provide appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for warmer temperatures and encourage the removal of PPE when workers are resting.
- Avoid colours and fabrics that absorb and insulate heat in worker uniforms.
- Provide sunscreen with an appropriate protection factor.

Raise awareness:
- Employers should make sure that they and their staff are aware of early signs of heat-related illnesses such as heatstroke and heat exhaustion, advising them of steps that must be taken if a medical emergency occurs.

Supervise high risk work:
- Employers should regularly check on staff who are undertaking physically strenuous tasks and rotate staff undertaking strenuous tasks.
- Use a buddy system for outdoor or hot-work roles and increase supervision in hot spells.

Supporting vulnerable groups:
Consider individual adjustments for employees who are particularly susceptible to heat-related illnesses and injuries. Recognising vulnerable workers: Workers at increased risk include:
- Pregnant workers
- Workers with cardiovascular disease
- Workers with diabetes or kidney disease
- Outdoor workers
- Workers undertaking physically demanding work.
- Workers exposed to high workplace temperatures (e.g. foundries, kitchens, bakeries)
- Night shift workers during prolonged hot weather
- Some medications may impair thermoregulation or increase dehydration risk (e.g. diuretics are common)

Workers returning from annual leave, sickness absence or new employees may require a **gradual increase** in workload when working in hot environments.

Preparing for heatwaves:
Employers should monitor the UKHSA heat-health alerts and review arrangements before periods of hot weather. Preparations should include reviewing heat risk assessments, check

ventilation, and cooling systems, ensuring drinking water supplies are available, reminding staff about heat-related risks, and confirming arrangements for vulnerable workers.

Advice for workers:

Legal Protection - Understanding your rights as a worker is integral to keeping safe whilst working in extreme heat conditions. This is evident in Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996, which states that workers have the right to leave or refuse to return to a workplace if they reasonably believe they are in serious and imminent danger such as risk of heat-related illness such as heatstroke.

Hydration - It is important to regularly hydrate throughout the day.

Advocacy - It is important to advocate for safe working conditions.

Use of cooling systems - Using mechanical ventilation to cool the room temperature, closing curtains or blinds on sun-facing windows, and positioning oneself away from direct sunlight. Employees could use natural ventilation where appropriate.

Awareness - Heat-related illnesses can develop quickly so make yourself aware of symptoms of heat-related illness to keep both you and your colleagues safe. This can include dizziness, confusion, headaches, muscle cramps, nausea, loss of consciousness and seizures.

Workplace attire - Dress appropriately for the weather where workplaces rules allow.

Flexible working - Where possible, work from home during a heat wave to avoid unnecessary travel.

Takeaway messages

- Recognise heat as an occupational health hazard.
- Review risk assessments before and during heatwaves.
- Prioritise hydration, ventilation, and regular rest breaks.
- Adapt work schedules during periods of extreme heat.
- Identify and support workers who are at increased risk of heat-related illnesses.
- Train staff to recognise heat-related illness.
- Work proactively with occupational health services to build long-term resilience amid extreme heat events.

Protecting workers from heat is not only a legal duty but an investment in employee health, wellbeing, safety, and organisational performance.

Annex 1: Heat related illness and injuries		
Ilness/ injury	**Symptoms**	**What to do**
Heat stroke: medical emergency. This occurs when the body thermoregulatory system fails, and its core temperature rises above 41°C.	Confusion, collapse, seizures, loss of consciousness, fast heart rate, fast breathing, hot skin without sweating, seizure, and loss of consciousness	Call 999 immediately and begin rapid cooling. This is considered a life-threatening emergency and requires immediate medical attention.
Heat exhaustion: This occurs when the body is unable to cool itself due to the excessive loss of water and salt by sweating.[3]	Heavy sweating, dizziness, headache, nausea, cramps, pale clammy skin	Move to a cool place, loosen clothing, give water, cool with wet cloths or fan. Seek medical advice if symptoms persist beyond 30 minutes.
Heat Rash: This is caused by blocked sweat ducts and occurs during warmer climates.[7]	Mild swelling, itchy and prickly feeling, and small raised spots which may appear red or white.	Keep skin cool by drinking plenty of water. Calm the itchy feeling by applying something cold for 20 minutes. Employers could allow for looser clothes or clothes with cotton fabric where appropriate. [4]
Heat Cramps: This is painful muscle cramps and spasms that occurs during or after intense physical activity and sweat in heat.[10]	Painful muscle cramps that usually occurs in the legs and abdomen.	If you experience heat cramps make sure to move to a cool area and rest. Remove any excess clothing such as jackets and place cool the skin down by fanning your skin or place something cool on it. You should gently and slowly stretch cramped muscles.
Dehydration: This is when there is a deficit of total body water that could affects your body's functioning and could to lead to severe health complications.[5]	You may feel thirst, have a headache, feel nausea, feel dizzy, experience having a dry mouth, lips and tongue, feel fatigue, you may have sunken eyes and urinate less often than usual.	drink plenty of fluids. If you feel nausea or have vomited, you may have troubles drinking so you should start with small sips and then gradually increase intake. Avoid caffeinated drinks as this will cause dehydration. [12]
Sunburn: This is damage to the skin caused by exposure to sunlight.[6]	The skin may feel painful or feel too hot to touch and it could also flake or peel. For severe sunburns, the skin could blister.[13]	Apply after-sun suncream, get out of the sun light into a shaded area, make sure to intake plenty of water to cool down and prevent dehydration. Shield sunburnt skin from direct sunlight.[7]
Insomnia: This is caused by experiencing a lack of sleep for a long period of time.[8]	Insomnia may cause irritability, feeling fatigued and lack of concentration during the day.[15]	

[3] Kenny GP et al, 2018. Heat Exhaustion. Thermoregulation: From Basic Neuroscience to Clinical Neurology, Part II
[4] NHS. Heat rash (prickly heat) [Internet]. nhs.uk. 2017. Available from: https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/heat-rash-prickly-heat/
[5] Taylor K, et al, 2025. Adult dehydration [Internet]. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK555956/
[6] Guerra KC, Crane JS. Sunburn [Internet]. PubMed. 2023. Available from: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30521258/
[7] NHS Choices. Sunburn [Internet]. NHS. 2020. Available from: https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sunburn/
[8] Naha S, Sivaraman M, Sahota P. Insomnia : A Current Review. Missouri Medicine [Internet]. 2024 Jan ;121(1) :44.

Annex 2: Long-term heat related illnesses/injuries

Internal cellular injury: Cells within our organs such as blood cells are sensitive to heat, hyperthermia could cause damage on cellular level even causing cellular death.[9] This can also cause organ injury.[5]

Non-Melanoma Skin Cancer: This is a cancer that is found on the top layer of the skin and is mainly caused by exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light. [8] Symptoms include growth or unusual patch on the skin often found in areas commonly exposed to the sun such as back, legs, hands, lower legs, neck and shoulders, head, face, and ears.[10]

Cardiovascular risk: heat exposure could result in an increased strain on the heart muscles. It increases the risk of cardiovascular disease.[11]

Mental health: extreme heat exposure can have profound effects on mental health.[12] Employees could experience a lack of concentration, an increase in irritability, fatigue, insomnia, stress, and anxiety.[19]

[9] Iba T, et al, 2025. Impact of hyper- and hypothermia on cellular and whole-body physiology. Journal of Intensive Care. 2025
[10] Cives M, et al. Non-Melanoma Skin Cancers: Biological and Clinical Features. International Journal of Molecular Sciences [Internet]. 2020 Jul 29 ;21(15). Available from : https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7432795/
[11] Liu J, et al. Heat exposure and cardiovascular health outcomes: a systematic review and meta-analysis. The Lancet Planetary Health [Internet]. 2022 Jun 1;6(6):484–95. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2542519622001176
[12] Baecker L. Impacts of extreme heat on mental health: Systematic review and qualitative investigation of the underpinning mechanisms. The Journal of Climate Change and Health [Internet]. 2025 Apr 11; 22:100446.