

Toolbox Talks 2

013: Assumptions That Can Kill You: Hot Weather

Discussion leader duties for this session:

Think about some tasks on a recent summer job where fatigue from the heat could have resulted in lapses of judgment and then injury. Be prepared to give these as examples.

What this Safety Talk covers:

Assumptions that can lead to death in hot weather. Most safety tutorials for hot weather address heat stroke, and that topic *should* be addressed. But there's another problem that people seldom think about. Both dehydration and fatigue from the heat can cloud thinking and cause poor judgment. The secondary effects from these are seldom attributed to the root cause—overheating.

Discussion notes:

Some hot weather facts to think about

- Eating salt tablets does not protect you from the heat. In fact, using these tablets can compound heat problems by exacerbating dehydration. Use sparingly, if at all.
- Gatorade and similar drinks are no more effective than plain water for restoring body fluids. But the sugar in these drinks can produce unsafe side effects, including hyperactivity (sugar high) and drowsiness (sugar crash).

Cautions

- Sunlight is a part of hot weather. If working outdoors, wear UV-rated sunglasses to prevent corneal damage and eliminate an eye cancer risk factor.
- You can feel tired, dizzy, or irritable without actually suffering from the classic hot weather problems of heat stroke or heat exhaustion. And you may be inattentive without even realizing it. Any of these symptoms of heat fatigue increase your risk of doing something unsafe. The fatigue itself is not the problem.

Assumptions

- “As long as I eat salt tablets, I can take the heat.” The reality is few people, if any, lose enough salt to result in a salt deficiency. A fluid deficiency, however, is a very real problem. The combination of low body fluids and high salt intake is a recipe for high blood pressure. That can lead to chronic or acute illness.
- “If I’m not sweaty and I’m not pale, then I’m OK.” These assumptions refer to the symptoms we normally think of in hot weather. These symptoms indicate a serious condition that needs immediate attention. Being fatigued doesn’t really hurt you, so we tend to ignore that condition. But while fatigued, we make more mistakes.
- “Everyone else is just as alert as usual.” Not so. That lift truck driver may be in a hurry to get back to the air conditioned office for a badly needed break. Or the guy in the pickup truck may be looking down at the air conditioning vents wondering why it’s still so hot in that truck. People are distracted by the heat—allow for that.
- “My grip is normal.” What do we do when we are hot? We perspire. Think about this when using hand tools, handrails, or ladders. To avoid repeated trips up and down ladders, plan ahead for dropping a tool or part and bring extras. Give fall protection extra consideration. And consider that anyone working above you may also have sweaty hands.

Review and discussion

1. What are some dangers to consider before consuming salt tablets?
2. What is the one thing you need to make sure you have plenty of in hot weather?

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