

# You Can Take the Heat

The weather in Alberta is a study in extremes, from bone-chilling cold in the winter to scorching heat in the summer. After an all-too-long deep freeze, those warm rays beaming down from a cloudless sky can be a most welcome sight. Working outside in the sunshine is great, but the nice weather brings a few hazards of its own along with it. Here are some things to keep in mind to stay safe in the sun.

## UVA, UVB, SPF... WTF?

When your job keeps you in coveralls and a hardhat all day, you probably don't worry too much about getting sunburned. But it's still a good idea to apply protective sunscreen to exposed areas, like your face, ears, and the back of your neck.

There are a ridiculous number of options in the drug store's sunscreen aisle. So what do all those letters stand for, anyway?

**UVA:** Sunlight contains two types of UltraViolet rays that can damage your skin. UVA rays Age your skin.

**UVB:** UVB rays Burn your skin. Both UVA and UVB can contribute to an increased risk of skin cancer.

**SPF:** Stands for Sun Protection Factor, and measures the sunscreen's level of protection against UVB. Generally speaking, the higher the better.

In theory, the number represents how many times longer you could stay in the sun and not get burned than you could without it. For example, if you're light-skinned and burn on a sunny day within 10 minutes, an SPF-15 sunscreen should offer you 150 minutes of protection. However, that's not necessarily accurate — it depends on how intense the sunlight is, your skin type, whether you sweat or rinse the sunscreen off, and if you put enough on in the first place.



### When choosing a sunscreen:

- Go with SPF 30, but keep in mind that proper application is necessary to get that level of protection.
- Look for sunscreen that offers both UVA and UVB protection.
- Check for ingredients like zinc oxide, titanium dioxide, or avobenzone, which offer good UVA protection.

### When you apply your sunscreen:

- Be generous! Use a dollop about the size of a loonie to cover your face.
- Slap extra on the back of your neck, and cover all the nooks and crannies of your ears, too.
- Reapply often, every two to four hours, or even more frequently on intensely sunny days.
- Even if it's cloudy outside, it's a good idea to sunscreen up. Cloud cover does not completely block those UV rays.

### If you do get burned:

- Apply a cool, clean, moist cloth to the affected area.
- If the burn covers a large area, a cool bath or shower can help bring the heat down.

- Painkillers like aspirin or ibuprofen can help alleviate discomfort. If you're in serious pain, seek medical attention.
- Aloe vera lotions help heal the burn.

## YOU GOTTA WEAR SHADES

Your eyes are vulnerable to damage from UV rays, too, so a good pair of sunglasses is essential. Skip "cosmetic" shades; you want lenses that block as high a percentage of UVA and UVB rays as possible. If you wear safety glasses over prescription specs, polycarbonate lenses usually come with UV protection. Read the product labels and make the best choice!



### Your Hydration Situation

You have a few drinks with your buddies the night before your shift. A cup or two of coffee in the morning. Maybe slam an energy drink to get over the midday hump. Unfortunately, not all fluids are created equal.

Fluids containing alcohol and caffeine are diuretics — they make you pee more. Combined with higher temperatures that make you sweat more, drinking them can put you on a path to dehydration.

Water is the lubricant that keeps your body and brain running smoothly. When it's hot out, it's a good idea to keep drinking water throughout the day to stay hydrated, even if you don't feel thirsty. Bring a container of water with you and take a good, long swig or two every 15 to 20 minutes.

### Sunshine Sickness

Hopefully, your cab is air-conditioned, but even so, it can get pretty stuffy in there, and wearing a Hawaiian shirt and shorts to stay cool is not an option.

Working long hours in the hot sun can lead to heat-related illnesses including, in order of increasing severity:

**Heat Rash ("Prickly Heat"):** Clusters of itchy red bumps. To prevent them, try to wear your clothes a bit loose to let your skin breathe. They usually go away on their own, but applying a cold, wet washcloth to it or soaking in a cool tub can help (let the area air-dry rather than rubbing it with a towel). Calamine lotion or hydrocortisone cream can help soothe the itch.

**Heat Cramps:** Painful muscle aches and spasms, brought on by physical exertion in the heat. They should go away after resting for a while in a cool spot and slowly but steadily drinking water.

**Heat Exhaustion:** You feel faint, dizzy or nauseous, your vision is blurry, your heart's beating quickly even though your blood pressure is low. You feel like you're going to pass out, or you actually do. You need rest and water, and to get out of hot, restrictive clothing. Seek medical attention, especially if you lost consciousness.

### Heat Stroke (Sunstroke):

This is a life-threatening condition that can result in permanent brain damage or death. Immediate medical attention is absolutely necessary! Symptoms include those related to heat exhaustion, as well as irrational behavioural changes, vomiting, convulsions and unconsciousness. While you're waiting for medical help to arrive, you can try to lower the person's body temperature by covering them with a wet sheet and fanning them, or, if possible, immersing them in cool (not icy cold) water.

It is possible to get used to working in high temperatures ("acclimated"), but it takes a little time. In fact, the people most likely to suffer heat-related illness are those new on the jobsite — new employees or guys coming back from vacation or a layoff.

Of course, you can't control how sunny it's going to be on the job. But if you're not acclimated to the heat, if at all possible, try to avoid jumping right into the hot seat for the first few days. If you can, do the heaviest physical work outside the hottest hours of the day: before 11 a.m. and after 4 p.m. And work at a steady pace, not a mad rush.

When there's just no escaping the sun, your best defence is to stay well hydrated. Wear loose-fitting clothes so your skin can breathe, and whenever possible, take rest breaks in a cool area.

## KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR BUDDY

It can be hard to spot the signs of heat illness, especially if you're the one experiencing it! The heat literally plays tricks on your mind, so you don't notice your own symptoms until it's too late. So keep an eye on each other out there. If Dave looks faint or flushed, give him a hand — and some water. If Bill starts swearing at the top of his lungs (even more than usual), he might not just be ticked off, he might actually be sick!

### Buzz Off!

You know how it goes in Alberta — if we have a damp spring, we're going to have clouds of mosquitoes in the summer. Usually, these buzzing pests are just that — an annoyance. However, there is a chance that they could carry West Nile virus.

If a close encounter with a swarm leaves you with an unusually high number of itchy bite bumps, an over-the-counter antihistamine like Benadryl will help.

Most people infected with West Nile virus won't even show any symptoms. About 20% may develop flu-like symptoms, including fever, head and body aches, nausea, and skin rash. And a very small percentage (about 1 in 150) can develop a severe infection, with such symptoms as high fever, stiffness, tremors, convulsions and paralysis. Again, these effects are pretty rare, but

if you suspect you may have West Nile symptoms, seek medical care right away.

The best way to keep the bloodsuckers backed off is to use an insect repellent with DEET. Apply liberally on exposed skin and over clothing. The DEET messes with mosquitoes' reception (rather than repelling them by smell); they'll still be flying all around, but won't tend to land on you. So you don't need to reapply until the little creeps start coming in for a landing. 🦟



## DEHYDRATION SIGNS AND TREATMENT

Dehydration is sneaky. You can't rely on feeling thirsty to notice it. Instead, watch yourself and your coworkers for:

- fatigue
- irritability
- headaches
- nausea
- giddiness
- not passing urine, or passing little urine that is dark yellow to orange in colour

Mild dehydration can be treated with fluid replacement — drink water slowly, in small sips, not big gulps — and rest in a cool area. Remember, alcohol and caffeinated drinks will only make things worse!

