DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER & BUSINESS SERVICES

NEWS RELEASE

Oregon OSHA, 350 Winter St. NE, Room 430, Salem, Oregon 97301-3878

For immediate release:
July 1, 2009

Contact information:
Melanie Mesaros, Public Information Officer
503-947-7428
melanie.l.mesaros@state.or.us

Rising temperatures increase risks for workers

Understand the signs of heat exhaustion; take precautions

From construction workers to chefs, working in the heat can be more than uncomfortable. At times, it can also be unsafe. Workers run the risk of developing a heat-related illness when physical exertion is combined with high humidity.

Over the past five years, 32 workers received benefits through Oregon's workers' compensation system for heat-related illnesses. The workers who qualified for the benefit were disabled for three days or more. Oregon OSHA, a division of the Department of Consumer and Business Services, does not require companies to report less-severe cases of heat exhaustion that do not require overnight hospitalization.

Employers and workers should be familiar with some of the common indicators of heat exhaustion. A person overcome with heat exhaustion will still sweat but may experience extreme fatigue, nausea, lightheadedness, or a headache. The person could have clammy and moist skin, a pale complexion, and a normal or only slightly elevated body temperature. If heat exhaustion is not treated promptly, the illness could progress to heat stroke, and possibly even death.

Workers on construction sites may be at greater risk for heat illness due to heavy exertion, enclosed operator cabs with poor air circulation, and prolonged exposure to the sun.

To help a person suffering from heat exhaustion:

• Move them to a cool, shaded area. Don't leave them alone.
• Loosen and remove heavy clothing.
• Provide cool water to drink (a small cup every 15 minutes) if they are not feeling sick to their stomach.
• Try to cool them by fanning them. Cool the skin with a spray mist of cold water or a wet cloth.
• If they do not feel better in a few minutes, call 911 for emergency help.

Certain medications can increase a worker's risk. People who have experienced a heat-induced illness in the past or who must wear personal protective equipment while on the job are at higher risk for heat illness.

Heat stroke is a different condition than heat exhaustion. There are several reactions that occur in the human body with heat stroke: dry, pale skin (no sweating); hot, red skin (looks like a sunburn); mood changes; irritability and confusion; and collapsing (person will not respond to

verbal commands). Call for emergency help immediately if you think the person is suffering from heat exhaustion. If not treated quickly, the condition can result in death.

Ideally, employers and workers can prevent heat illness. Here are some tips:

• Learn the signs and symptoms of heat-induced illnesses and what to do to help other workers.
• Perform the heaviest, most labor-intensive work during the coolest part of the day.
• Slowly build up tolerance to the heat and the work activity (this usually takes up to two weeks).
• Use the buddy system to monitor the heat (work in pairs).
• Drink plenty of cool water (one small cup every 15-20 minutes).
• Wear light, loose-fitting, breathable clothing (such as cotton).
• Take frequent short breaks in cool, shaded areas — allow your body to cool down.
• Avoid eating large meals before working in hot environments.
• Avoid caffeine and alcoholic beverages (these beverages make the body lose water and increase the risk of heat illnesses).

A “Heat Stress Safety” pocket reminder card is available from Oregon OSHA. You can download the card, in both English and Spanish, from Oregon OSHA's Web site, www.orosha.org, under “Publications”; look for “Heat Stress Card” (#3333E). The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) also has a booklet with heat-stress prevention tips called “Working in Hot Environments.” The booklet is available for download from NIOSH's Web site, www.cdc.gov/niosh/hotenvt.html.

###