

Tips for Handling the Heat

The logo for Turf, featuring the word "Turf" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A green grass blade graphic is integrated into the letter 'T'.The logo for Tree Services, featuring the words "Tree Services" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A small green leaf graphic is above the 'i' in "Services". Below the main text is the tagline "Taking Tree Care to New Heights" in a smaller, italicized font.The logo for DesignBuild, featuring the word "Design" in a black, sans-serif font and "Build" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font. A small orange square graphic is above the 'i' in "Design".The logo for PLOW, featuring the word "PLOW" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font.

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Unrelenting, overwhelming heat can be devastating to a landscape company's employees and, ultimately, to its bottom line. That's why intelligently handling the heat is a necessity.

Many states, including Florida, Mississippi, Arizona, Louisiana and their immediate neighbors, deal with heat issues year-round. For the rest of the nation, summertime requires diligence – and changes in climate such as Indian Summer can bring surprises with which landscapers must deal.

There are numerous industries such as construction, landscape architecture, pool safety and maintenance, athletic field and golf course maintenance, and sports clinics where warm weather presents real health concerns. Exposure to hot climate elements can be just as damaging as the cold weather issues employees up north face when working outdoors during the winter months.

The Occupational Safety and Health Act does not have a standard that specifically addresses an employer's obligation to protect employees from the hazards created by sun exposure. This, however, does not leave the employer without risk; section [\(5\)\(a\)\(1\) of the Act](#) (the so-called "General Duty Clause") states that "each employer shall furnish to each of his employees employment and a place of employment which are free from recognized hazards that are causing or likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees." In the absence of a specific standard as to heat exposure, [OSHA](#) typically will issue a general duty clause citation to an employer whose employees are at risk of suffering heat-related injuries. Employers who care about their employees must take steps to ensure the safety and protection of workers, just as those who work with hazardous material or dangerous equipment.

OSHA's [Personal Protective Equipment](#) (PPE) standard states that employers must provide protective equipment and training to employees who work under certain conditions. Exposure to sunlight and heat – established enemies in

the landscape industry, for one, and many other industries, as well – are included in these environmental hazards. Complying with this standard is mandatory – employees must supply appropriate apparel and equipment that prevent or minimize the damaging effects of the sun on skin, eyes, head and other exposed body parts.

Furthermore, there is at least one OSHA Standard Interpretation of PPE rule that requires employers to protect their employees from overexposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun. While the rule is not specific in assessing what overexposure is exactly, it is evident that violating the rule can cause legal problems, as well as tremendous issues in running a business.

Medical issues resulting from lack of discipline in protecting the body from the sun can be as extreme as skin cancer, heat stroke or unconsciousness. There are more than 1 million new cases of skin cancer reported each year in the U.S., according to the [National Cancer Institute](#) (NCI). Overexposure to the sun is the leading cause of skin cancer, and there are higher rates of skin cancer reported in states where the sun is stronger. In addition, employees may be frequently absent if dealing with burnt skin, extreme exhaustion or significant dizziness – all likely results of too much exposure to the sun.

Not only is it simply the right thing to do to take care of one's employees, but employers would be best served to create written and enforced policies that protect their employees. This also will reduce the possibility of workers' compensation claims and OSHA citations. When outdoor work dominates the business, the only sensible approach is to be proactive.

A few tips to keep in mind can have tremendous benefits to company owners who face outdoor issues:



1. Develop a system whereby various shifts reduce exposure in the worst heat of the day. There's no escaping the outdoors, but the timing and duration of exposure often can be controlled. Maximize schedules so peak sun times are not involved – often 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. – or at least reduced. Rotate workers in and out of non-shaded areas of the job site to avoid overexposure of any one group of employees, and provide shaded break areas and plenty of potable water.



2. Require employees to protect themselves. Make mandatory the use of protective eyewear such as UV-resistant sunglasses. Encourage wearing hats with wide brims and lightweight long-sleeved shirts to protect against skin cancer factors. Use common sense – urge workers to apply a sunblock of at least 30 SPF at all times and to reapply frequently. Keep employees hydrated. Water must be readily available. Provide training on use of these PPE, and make sure employees know how to obtain appropriate safety equipment, if they lose, misplace or break PPE previously provided to them.



3. Encourage awareness of one another in the workforce. Workers should look out for each other to detect wooziness, inability to focus, unsteadiness and reddening of the skin. Sometimes the victim of heat is the last one to be aware of what's happening.



4. Educate employees on means of prevention and early detection. Keep them apprised of the early signs of heat exhaustion, dehydration and skin cancer. Provide them with the necessary equipment and knowledge of what to look for. As with any illness or syndrome, early detection can prevent the situation from becoming serious.

Sadly, what does happen from time to time is employees resist their employer's efforts to ensure worker safety. This is when enforcement of company safety policies is crucial. Employers should not be hesitant to discipline employees who violate such policies, even if that may mean termination of employment. Enforcement sends a clear message to all other employees that the company is serious about safety.

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