

# LETTER CARRIER HOT WEATHER SAFETY

Heat-related illness is warm season hazard for all letter carriers and many are affected by the symptoms of heat illness each year. The physical exertion required with the delivery of mail, which typically coincides with the hottest part of the day, can lead to debilitating symptoms such as dehydration or even more serious problems for those who do not properly prepare and compensate for the heat. Additionally, the absence of good ventilation as well as limited air circulation in older postal vehicles contributes to heat-related problems for letter carriers. Vehicles also act as hot boxes that collect and intensify heat from the sun, a small-scale example of the “greenhouse effect.”

Warmer air can hold much more moisture than colder air, hence the common expression “it’s not the heat, it’s the humidity.” Humid air will significantly increase the discomfort and potential risk of heat illness because it decreases the ability of the skin to cool the body through the evaporation of perspiration. The chill that we sometimes feel when stepping out of a pool is caused by the evaporation of water on our skin. Water evaporates more rapidly into dry air; hence cooling is more pronounced. As moisture in the air increases, evaporation is inhibited and cooling is limited.

Do not be fooled by relative humidity values that are typically in the 30 to 50 percent range on summer afternoons. That may seem low, but “relative” humidity is merely a mathematically derived value of the amount of moisture in the air as a percentage of that which air at that temperature can hold. The lower the relative humidity, the more air can be cooled before reaching its saturation point, also known as the dewpoint. Air with a temperature of 85 degrees Fahrenheit and 50% relative humidity holds more than twice the moisture in the form of water vapor than air with a temperature of 32 degrees and 100% relative humidity.

Letter carriers should be aware of the initial symptoms of heat-related illness and immediately take steps to prevent them from becoming more serious. This means taking a short break, sipping (not gulping) cool water or nutrient added water such as coconut water (a good source of potassium and other electrolytes) to provide hydration, and getting into a cool place if this is possible. The most common heat-related illnesses that affect letter carriers are heat cramps and heat exhaustion. Heat cramps are muscle cramps that usually occur in the legs. They can usually be relieved by resting and by putting firm pressure on the cramping muscles or by massaging them.

A more serious heat-related problem is heat exhaustion. This is a feeling of weakness that is accompanied by heavy sweating, nausea, and a weak pulse. The skin often feels cold and clammy. Another important indication of heat exhaustion is a feeling of disorientation. This is a sure sign that heat is adversely affecting your body, and you should immediately stop whatever you are doing outdoors and get inside in a cool place and sip cool water. If you feel severely nauseated or start to vomit, immediate medical care should be obtained.

The most serious heat-related illness is heat stroke. This is characterized by a very high body temperature, a pounding pulse rate, and usually not any sweating. Heat stroke is a life-threatening medical emergency that requires immediate emergency treatment. Heat-related illness that is directly caused by a letter carrier’s work environment is also considered to be a job-related traumatic injury that should be reported on OWCP form CA-1. Medical evidence to support a claim of job-related heat illness should specifically identify the exposures (the work-related factors) experienced by the letter carrier and include medical rationale that links these factors to the resulting illness.

To help prevent dehydration and heat-related illness, a slow and consistent intake of cool liquid. Drinks containing sugar, salt, caffeine or alcohol will actually increase dehydration of the body. As a guide, a letter carrier or anyone working outside in hot weather should slowly drink several ounces of cool liquid every 15 to 30 minutes.

Most of always all use common sense! If you feel the initial symptoms of heat-related illness while working, stop what you are doing, get into a cool location (or least a shaded one), sip some water, and then proceed with your work after the symptoms subside. If you continue to feel ill, stop and seek medical treatment.

Dressing for warm weather is for the most part obvious. Wear light and comfortable clothing that still complies with uniform regulations. Be sure to protect your skin, especially your face, from too much exposure to the sun. A good sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30 is quite helpful. Many letter carriers have developed skin cancer that is likely related to long-term exposure to the sun while performing their work. **Be aware that a cloudy summer day** does not prevent the risk of sunburn, as ultraviolet radiation from the sun still reaches the earth.

As with all aspects of letter carrier safety, advance planning and situational awareness are critical for the prevention of heat-related illness. Don't let the power of the summer sun threaten your health and well-being while on the job or off the job.

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