

## TOOLBOX TALKS

### Health Risks from Working in the Sun

Whilst a sunny day makes most of us feel good and we welcome the better weather, when it's critically hot for long periods of time there are associated health risks and too much strong sunlight can be detrimental to a person's skin.

A person whose job keeps them outdoors for long periods of time, such as some security staff, may get more sun on their skin than is healthy for them and should therefore carefully consider the risk to their health. What are the dangers?

#### **Sunburn / Heat Rash**

Even on cloudy days in the summer, enough ultraviolet radiation can filter through to cause burning and we all know that overexposure may cause sunburn to blister your skin and make it peel.

Working in hot/humid weather conditions can cause the body to perspire more. If sweat glands become blocked resulting in sweat becoming trapped beneath your skin, irritation and the characteristic heat rash commonly known as 'prickly heat' can develop.

In most cases, heat rash will clear up on its own in a few days if the affected area is kept cool and dry. However, prickly heat that does not go away within a few days, may develop an infection where the bumps have burst. This may require some medication to prevent against secondary infection and/or assist in controlling any inflammation. In such circumstances, always consult your pharmacist, practice nurse or doctor.

#### **Heat Exhaustion / Heatstroke**

Heat exhaustion which if left untreated may develop into heat stroke - a potentially fatal condition amongst vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children under two and those with kidney/heart problems or diabetics using insulin.

Heat exhaustion can occur when the temperature inside the body (the core temperature) rises to anything between the normal 37°C (98.6°F) up to 40°C (104°F). At this temperature, the levels of water and salt in the body begin to fall, which can cause a person to feel sick/faint and sweat heavily with flushed hot skin. If a person with heat exhaustion is taken quickly to a cool place, is given water to drink and has their excess clothing removed, they should begin to feel better within half an hour and have no long-term complications.

However, heatstroke is far more serious and occurs when the body can no longer cool itself and starts to overheat. When the core temperature rises above 40°C (104°F) the cells inside the body begin to break down and important parts of the body stop working. If left untreated, it can lead to complications, such as loss of consciousness, organ failure and brain damage.

Heatstroke is a medical emergency and should be treated immediately. Dial 999 to request an ambulance if you suspect someone is suffering from this condition. While waiting for an ambulance to arrive, make sure that the person is as cool as possible. Move them to a cool area as

quickly as possible, remove excess clothing and try to cool them by fanning them. If they're conscious, give them cool (not cold) water to drink.

## **Skin cancer**

In the long term, the most serious effect is the increased chance of skin cancer later in life. It is almost always easy to cure but it should be caught early. Too much sun will also speed up the ageing of your skin, making it leathery, mottled and wrinkled. In England and Wales around 35,000 new cases of skin cancer are registered every year and approximately 1,600 deaths.

Some people are more liable to skin cancers than others. People with white skin are at most risk but it varies a lot. Take particular care if you have:

- Fair or freckled skin that does not tan, or burns before it tans
- Red or fair hair and light-coloured eyes
- A large number of moles – over 100 in young people, or over 50 in older people.

The first warning sign is often a small scabby spot which does not clear after a few weeks. Look for changed or newly formed moles or any skin discolouration. It is normal for moles to grow until you are about 18 years old, but as an adult you should show your doctor any moles which grow or change. If you notice any of these signs consult your doctor, explaining that you have an outdoor job.

Fortunately, most of these signs will be harmless, but medical checks may be needed to be sure. Even if a spot is cancerous, simple modern treatments can usually cure it and most do not spread to other parts of the body. The smaller the spot, the easier it is to cure, so do not put off going to the doctor when you know that you should.

## **How can I protect myself?**

- Shut windows and pull down the shades when it is hotter outside. If it's safe i.e. does not present a security risk to yourself, open windows to create ventilation when it is cooler.
- Avoid the heat: where possible stay out of the sun between 11am and 3pm (the hottest part of the day) especially if you're vulnerable to the effects of heat.
- Have cold drinks regularly, such as water and fruit juice. If you are not used to drinking caffeinated beverages, avoid tea or coffee which are considered mild diuretics and may not be as effective at rehydrating.
- Wear loose, cool clothing, and a hat if you go outdoors.
- Don't get burned - Get to know how your skin reacts to sunlight. This will help you decide what precautions to take. Remember, getting burned now may increase your chances of skin cancer in later years, so it's always safer to try and avoid the reddening that is the first sign of burning.
- Sunscreen – whilst a suntan may give some protection against burning it does not eliminate the longer-term risk of skin cancer; nor will it protect against premature ageing. Sunscreen creams and lotions can act as useful protection for parts of your body that are not easy to shade from the sun's rays such as the backs of your hands, also helping to moisturize the skin from the drying effects of prolonged exposure. Look for a sun protection factor (SPF) rating of 15 or more and always read the suppliers instructions on how it should be applied.

## Health Risks from Working in the Sun – Questions

Q1. Some people are more liable to skin cancers than others. Who should take particular care in the sun?

A1 .....

A2 .....

A3 .....

Q2. Give two examples of short-term risks from exposure to the sun?

A1 .....

A1 .....

Q3. If you suspect someone is suffering from heatstroke, what should you immediately do?

A .....

.....

Q4. There are a number of ways to protect yourself from the risks of working in the sun. Give three examples discussed in this Toolbox Talk.

A1 .....

A2 .....

A3 .....

Q5. Approximately how many cases of skin cancer are registered in England and Wales each year?

A .....

Employee Name: .....

Employee Number: .....

Manager's Name: .....

Date: .....