

## Health & Fitness Tips

### Heat Stress - Heat is on

By Rebecca Codey - RAAFsafe - Summer 2008



Heat stress can develop suddenly and very quickly lead to serious tissue damage and, in extreme cases, death. However, armed with a general understanding of what heat stress is, some strategies for prevention and immediate treatment, members can help themselves and their colleagues.

Environmental heat hazards pose a significant threat to personnel and can have serious ramifications for the ADF's capability.

The ADF has a lot of environments where people could be exposed to heat stress and as an employer, ADF needs to, and wants to, keep its people safe. Just as importantly, individuals need to have an awareness of the implications of heat stress for themselves and their workmates.

Preventing the initial occurrence, then — if required — preventing the escalation of heat stress through the early recognition of symptoms and the immediate treatment of minor heat injuries, will reduce the risk of more serious consequences.

Heat stress occurs when the body is unable to cool itself enough to maintain a healthy temperature. "Normally, the body does this by sweating, but sometimes sweating isn't enough and the body temperature keeps rising," as reported by the Victorian Government's [Better Health Channel](#) website.

People undertaking demanding physical activities in hot, humid environments are most at risk of heat stress. However, physical activities conducted in inadequately ventilated buildings, close to machinery or during the summer months in more temperate climates can also pose potential heat-stress risks, according to [Safetyman, Volume 1, Part 3, Chapter 6](#).

Heat injuries include heat rash, heat cramps, dizziness and fainting, and heat stroke; and range in severity from mildly painful to fatal.

Prevention is the best method for managing heat-related illness. The [Better Health Channel](#) lists a number of common-sense tips.

- Keep up the fluids — you need to drink more during hot weather, regardless of how active you are. Do not wait until you are thirsty to drink.
- Drink plenty of water or other cool, non-alcoholic fluids. (Check with your doctor if you are on limited fluids or fluid pills.)
- Avoid alcohol or drinks that contain lots of sugar.
- Don't have extremely cold liquids, as they may cause stomach cramps.
- Avoid exposure to heat — stay out of the sun as much as you can.
- Protect yourself outside. If you must be outdoors, remember to protect yourself from the sun — cover exposed skin with lightweight clothes, use sunscreen and wear a hat.
- Limit physical activity — too much physical activity on a hot day (even just moderately hot) can lead to heat stress. If you can, restrict activity to cooler parts of the day.
- Eat regularly, as the loss of salt in sweat is a big factor in heat-related illness. It is not enough to only drink water.

All levels of command, management and supervision are obliged to effectively mitigate risks arising from environmental heat hazards by applying appropriate risk-management protocols".

Personnel, have a responsibility to adhere to the heat-stress-prevention policy to protect themselves and the people within their command. The policy provides guidance in the implementation of risk-management strategies for the prevention of heat-related illness/disorders.

**Important points to remember**

- *Heat stress can be prevented.*
- *Keep cool, avoid vigorous physical activity in hot weather, and drink plenty of water and other non-alcoholic fluids.*
- *Seek medical assistance if a person shows any signs of heat exhaustion or heat stroke.*
- *At all times notify supervisors of any incidents of heat stress.*

An e-learning package was developed by [Defence Occupational Health, Safety and Compensation Branch](#) in conjunction with [Directorate of Defence Aviation and Air Force Safety \(DDAAFS\)](#) Air Force staff, after a heat stress injury within the ADF prompted the organisation to find better ways to manage the risk of heat stress. It is designed for civilian and military personnel working in Air Force; however, other services or groups are welcome to use the resource. The e-learning package can be found at:

<http://dckrwn042.defence.gov.au/Training/elearning/20081001HeatStressAirForce/index.htm>