

FEELING THE HEAT: YOUR RIGHTS AT WORK IN HOT WEATHER

Key action points:

GMB Safety Representatives should ensure that they:

-  monitor the air temperature and keep a daily record- by law your employer must supply thermometers in every part of the workplace;
-  take complaints to the employer - GMB Safety Representatives have the legal right to take up complaints on behalf of members; and
-  report any ill health effects in the accident book which can be used to record any 'personal injury' at work, including ill health effects from hot temperatures.



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Hot temperatures can affect people working indoors or outdoors in a range of different workplaces including offices.

The hazards:

Long hot summers are becoming standard in Britain. It is not uncommon at the height of summer for offices and other workplaces to record temperatures of 37°(95°F). This not only makes work tiring for employees, it is also a potential cause of accidents.

If people get too hot, they risk dizziness, fainting, or even heat cramps. In very hot conditions blood temperature rises. If the blood temperature elevates above 39 °C, there is a risk of heat stroke or collapse. Delirium or confusion can occur above 41°C. Blood temperatures at this level can prove fatal and even if a worker does recover, they may suffer irreparable organ damage.

Hot work indoors can lead to increased stress and lapses in concentration. These in turn can affect work by leading to mistakes and a reduced work rate and greater risk of accidents.

Employees who work outdoors run a higher risk of skin cancer. They may also experience heat stress and heat stroke. Exposure to sunlight

can speed up the ageing process. Sunburn can also occur, and exposure to UV rays can trigger cold sores and lupus. Eyes can also be affected by exposure leading to problems in the long term.

What does the law say?

All employees are protected by law from having to work in excessively hot temperatures. The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 state that the temperature within workplaces 'must be reasonable' but do not define an upper limit for what is reasonable.

As such, THERE IS NO LEGAL MAXIMUM WORKPLACE TEMPERATURE LIMIT.

GMB supports the policy of the TUC, which calls for a maximum temperature of 30°C (27°C for strenuous work).

The Chartered Institute of Building Services Engineers (CIBSE) recommends an acceptable temperature limit for most kinds of work is between 16°C and 24°C.

For different areas of work it recommends:

- offices 20°C;
- canteens and dining rooms 20°C;

hospital wards 19°C;
shops and showrooms 18°C;
warehouses 16°C;
Light work in factories: 16°C; and
Heavy work in factories: 13°C

Dealing with the hazards

1. Indoors:

Ventilation:

The law requires each enclosed workplace to be ventilated so that a continual flow of fresh or purified air is provided. Opening windows can do this – but if this does not produce continual fresh air then mechanical ventilation must be provided.

Provide air cooling plant/air conditioning:
Where temperatures reach uncomfortably high levels the employer must take reasonable measures to reduce the heat. In most cases the provision of air conditioning does not entail major expense to the employer. Most offices would only require the hire or purchase of stand-alone plug-in cooling units.

Shade windows:

By providing blinds and shades your employer can help to reduce temperature levels, cheaply and effectively.

Relax dress codes:

Having to wear a heavy uniform or official company garments can increase the stress and discomfort caused by excessive temperatures. Employers should relax dress codes and allow staff to wear loose-fitting, comfortable clothes.

Provide cold drinks and allow breaks:

When temperatures reach high levels employers should provide drinks free of charge – particularly cold water and soft drinks. Employees should also be allowed to take more frequent breaks from work areas and sit in a cooler area.

Offer more flexible working patterns:

Workers often have to travel to work on overcrowded trains or buses. Allowing them

the flexibility to either finish earlier or start later can help, as can allowing them more frequent rest breaks.

2. Outdoors

Clothing:

As a general rule the hotter the day the more covered up you should be. Clothing should be loose fitting and of a close woven fabric. Hats should be worn to protect your head, and sunscreen used on any unprotected parts of the body. Employers have a legal duty to provide any protective equipment that is necessary for you to do your job safely.

Eye protection:

Sunglasses may be necessary especially on jobs with a lot of glare. In these instances your employer should provide protective sunglasses free of charge. The glasses should meet British Standard 2724 and should have a glare protection factor of over 3.1 (this information should be on the box or label).

Sunscreen:

High sun protection factor sunscreen should be used (over Factor 15+) and you should reapply it regularly on exposed areas of your body.

Welfare Provision:

Your employer should make sure that you have plenty of breaks in a shaded area, and should provide you with free cold drinks. Where possible your employer should organise work so that you are working indoors at the hottest time of the day, and try to ensure that the work needing the most effort is not done at the hottest times.

If you believe that your employer is acting unlawfully please contact UnionLine for further advice.

Please note that in the event you have a claim in the Employment Tribunal you have only a limited period of time in order to take action, typically three months less one day from the date of the unlawful act.

CONTACT

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