

Editor's Note: Safety Group Program Monthly Newsletter Article — July 2020
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Masks and heat stress: Know the signs and reduce employees' risks

It has already been an unusually hot summer in Colorado, with [temperatures soaring above usual highs](#). The blazing weather arrives as employers implement protocols to slow the spread of COVID-19, such as wearing masks.

Many Colorado cities and counties now require people to put on masks when entering businesses, and Gov. Jared Polis [signed a mask order](#) mandating that workers in most industries wear face coverings.

The combination of wearing masks and extreme summer heat puts some workers at risk of developing [heat stress](#), which can lead to [heatstroke, rashes, exhaustion or cramps](#). Employees in industries such as agriculture or restaurants may be especially vulnerable since they work in hot fields or kitchens where heat stress is already a concern.

The good news is you can help your employees avoid heat stress.

Tips for avoiding heat stress while wearing masks

Here are 13 changes you can make to keep workers safe:

1. **Post signs detailing the symptoms of heat stress.** Alert employees about heat stress symptoms to watch for, such as thirst, fatigue, nausea, dizziness or weakness, and heavy sweating. Tell them to seek help as soon as possible if they experience several of these signs.
2. **Remind employees to hydrate regularly.** Hydration is critical to avoiding heat stress. Let employees keep water bottles nearby and refill the bottles often. Discourage workers from sharing water bottles, which can raise the risk of COVID-19 transmission.
3. **Implement a buddy system.** Assign each person a buddy, and [have them ask each other how they feel throughout the day](#). If an employee's condition changes, the buddy should notice and report the suspected heat fatigue.
4. **Allow employees to take more breaks.** Even giving workers 10 to 15 minutes to walk outside and remove their masks helps. Or you can create a shady or air-conditioned area where employees can take socially distant breaks.
5. **Monitor workers with preexisting conditions.** People with asthma, emphysema or other lung- or breathing-related conditions may be at greater risk for breathing problems with masks, and these issues can worsen with heat stress. Offer these workers extra breaks or other accommodations.

6. **Buy backup masks.** Allow your employees to switch masks if the one they're wearing becomes sweaty, which can make it difficult to breathe.
7. **Use disposable, nonsurgical masks.** These paper masks may feel lighter and easier to breathe through than cloth masks. Expandable pleats in the mask allow greater airflow to the mouth, for a more comfortable experience.
8. **Encourage light-colored masks.** For employees who work outside, light-colored masks absorb fewer ultraviolet rays than dark-colored ones, keeping the mask cooler.
9. **Let workers wear hats.** Hats can protect your employees' faces from the sun, making them less likely to overheat.
10. **Change working hours and/or workload.** If possible, make work shifts shorter, or start your employees' shifts earlier in the day, when temperatures are lower. Plan outdoor work activities around the temperature, reducing workload or minimizing physical activity during the warmest times of the day.
11. **Gradually increase workloads.** Allow new or returning workers to gradually increase their workload and take more frequent breaks as they [build a tolerance to working in the heat](#).
12. **Provide sweat-wicking clothes.** Offer employees who wear uniforms sweat-wicking versions that will keep them cooler and reduce the chance of heat stress.
13. **Use the OSHA-NIOSH Heat Safety Tool.** This app helps you plan outdoor work around temperatures. It features a real-time heat index and hourly forecasts specific to your location and offers precautionary recommendations from OSHA and NIOSH.

Finally, while it may seem tempting for employees to wet their masks to cool down, tell them not to do this. Wet masks do not filter air as well, and dampness compromises the structure of the mask, making the face covering less effective. Plus, microorganisms may grow in wet masks.

Need assistance implementing tips for mask safety? Contact a consultant at Pinnacol's Safety On Call at safetyoncall@pinnacol.com, 303.361.4700 or 888.501.4752.

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