Summer Resort Heat Related Exposures

Summer resort operations expose both guests and employees to high temperatures and often very high humidity. This combination of high temperatures and high humidity often results in heat related illnesses, the most common of which are heat stroke, heat exhaustion and heat cramps. Some states even mandate that employers with employees who routinely work outdoors have a written “heat illness prevention program” that addresses training of staff, water availability, rest breaks, access to shade, etc. All ski patrollers and EMTs are trained in heat related emergencies so it’s highly probable that some of your staff may already be trained and capable of dealing with heat related situations that are likely to arise during summer events or routine summer maintenance programs.

The three primary heat related illnesses are Heat Stroke, Heat Exhaustion and Heat Cramps. As with all risk management goals, preventing the perils of an exposure is much better than dealing with those perils after they have occurred. The perils of untreated heat related exposures could result in a fatality at your resort if not recognized quickly and treated appropriately.

Heat Stroke

Heat Stroke is a life threatening condition and occurs when the body has depleted its supply of water and salt, and the victim’s body temperature rises to deadly levels. A heat stroke victim may first suffer heat cramps and/or the heat exhaustion before progressing into the heat stroke stage. The early symptoms of heat stroke include a high body temperature (103 degrees F); a distinct absence of sweating (usually); hot red or flushed dry skin; rapid pulse; difficulty breathing; constricted pupils; any/all the signs or symptoms of heat exhaustion such as dizziness, headache, nausea, vomiting, or confusion, but more severe; bizarre behavior; and high blood pressure. Advance symptoms may be seizure or convulsions, collapse, loss of consciousness, and a body temperature of over 108°F.

It is vital to lower a heat stroke victim’s body temperature. Seconds count. Pour water on them, fan them, or apply cold packs. Call 911 and get an ambulance on the way as soon as possible.

Heat Exhaustion

Heat Exhaustion occurs when the body’s internal cooling system is overworked, but hasn’t completely shut down. This happens when you don’t drink enough fluids to replace what you’re sweating away. The symptoms of heat exhaustion include: headache, heavy sweating, intense thirst, dizziness, fatigue, loss of coordination, nausea, impaired judgment, loss of appetite, hyperventilation, tingling in hands or feet, anxiety, cool moist skin, weak and rapid pulse (120-200), and low to normal blood pressure.

Somebody suffering these symptoms should be moved to a cool location such as a shaded area or air-conditioned building. They should lie down with their feet slightly elevated, loosen their clothing and if possible apply cool, wet cloths or fan them. Finally, have them drink water or electrolyte drinks. Heat exhaustion is not a medical emergency but if not recognized and treated can lead to Heat Stroke.

Heat Cramps

Heat Cramps are muscle spasms which usually affect the arms, legs, or stomach and are caused by heavy sweating. While heat cramps can be painful, they usually don’t result in permanent damage and do not represent a medical emergency. To prevent heat cramps drink electrolyte solutions such as Gatorade during the day and try eating fruits high in potassium like bananas.

To reduce the likelihood of heat related conditions start by drinking lots of liquids, especially sports drinks that contain electrolytes. Avoid alcohol and caffeine as liquids containing these promote dehydration and will compound the effects of heat related illnesses. Take advantage of breaks in the shade or in air-conditioned buildings. Wear light weight and light colored clothing as these reflect the sun better and are more efficient in allowing the body to cool naturally.