

# Managing the Risk of Fatigue & Heat Illness

**1. Background.** Caregiving in Health and Social care is physically and emotionally demanding. This combined with warmer summer months and the extended use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and Respiratory Protective Equipment (RPE), as a result of the COVID-19 response, can lead to challenges for staff to self-care. It may also increase fatigue, impair safety critical decision making and lead to heat stress and ill health.

**2. Impact of Heat Illness.** Wearing PPE in warm/hot indoor environments, combined with the risk factors above, will increase the risk of heat stress. This occurs when the body is unable to cool itself enough to maintain a safe temperature. Heat stress can cause heat exhaustion and lead to heat stroke if the person is unable to cool down.

## 3. Planning for Managers

**a. Anticipate, Check & Plan.** Anticipate warm weather / events during the summer months and check the met office weather forecast. Use this information to plan. The link to do this is here: <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/>. (insert postcode / location for an accurate forecast).

**b. Assess Risk.** Managers have a legal duty to take all appropriate measures to assess and manage/mitigate the risk of staff developing heat stress/illness. Managers should consider the use of collective measures, rather than individual, measures first to reduce heat stress.

Risk factors you should consider include an assessment of the;

- Task and activities staff are likely to carry out when it is warm
- Duration of the activities and the work rate
- Working climate eg high air temperatures, high humidity and low air movement will increase the risk of heat stress
- Extent of use (level of PPE/RPE and duration of use) of PPE and RPE
- Staff with underlying health conditions
- Potential to take more frequent breaks and rehydration opportunities during the shift as temperature increases

When assessing the risk, speak to staff / staffside and seek their views. The assessment of risk with regards to fatigue and heat illness should be dynamic and may need to be reviewed routinely as case load and the frequency of PPE changes increase, with a resulting increase in demand.

## c. Communication.

- Raise awareness amongst staff of the signs of dehydration and heat stress (especially when wearing PPE/RPE) and measures that can be taken to reduce the risk. Ensure advice & messages are cascaded to frontline staff
- The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) have produced Health Education material for staff to encourage breaks and hydration. The material can be found here: <https://www.rcn.org/healthy-workplace/healthy-workplaces/health-and-safety/rest-rehydrate-refuel>

#### 4. Advice for Staff Working in Warmer / Hot Conditions

##### a. Breaks.

- Take regular breaks, find somewhere cool if you can.
- Frequent shorter breaks are better for reducing fatigue and improving productivity.
- For community staff who drive during their shift, rest breaks are of additional importance to avoid fatigue related road traffic accidents.
- Rest breaks also aid as a stress-reduction measure, particularly where the work is emotionally demanding. It provides an opportunity to network and socialise with other colleagues and rest the mind as well as the body.
- Allow staff to take power naps especially during night shifts
- This RCN poster provides further advice: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pdf-006701>

**b. Hydration.** Make sure you are hydrated (checking your urine is an easy way of keeping an eye on your hydration levels dark or strong-smelling urine is a sign that you should drink more fluids). The RCN poster provides further advice. <https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006704>

**c. Symptoms.** Be aware of the signs and symptoms of heat stress and dehydration (thirst, dry mouth, dark or strong-smelling urine, urinating infrequently or in small amounts, inability to concentrate, muscle cramps, fainting). Act promptly and do not wait until you start to feel unwell before you take a break.

**d. Buddy System.** Use a buddy system with your team to look out for the signs of heat stress (e.g. confusion, looking pale or clammy, fast breathing) in each other.

**e. Shift Changes.** Between shifts, try to stay cool as this will give your body a chance to recover

#### 5. Further advice and guidance can be found here:

- Public Health England / Health and Safety Executive CMO Letter dated 23 Jun 20, Personal Protective Equipment and heat: risk of heat stress <https://www.cas.mhra.gov.uk/ViewandAcknowledgment/ViewAlert.aspx?AlertID=103056>
- RCN Campaign, Rest, Refuel, <https://www.rcn.org.uk/healthy-workplace/healthy-workplaces/health-and-safety/rest-rehydrate-refuel>
- Health and Safety Executive, Heat Stress Guidance, <https://www.hse.gov.uk/temperature/heatstress/index.htm>
- The [Occupational Health and Wellbeing Service](#) and [Health and Safety Team](#) can also provide additional support and advice