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Outdoor workers urged to take care as temperatures soar

Outdoor workers such as trades people, gardeners and the many outdoor staff at the Australian Open are being urged to take care as temperatures soar this week.

ACTU President Ged Kearney said the extreme heat in Victoria and South Australia over the coming days will make working conditions, particularly for outdoor workers, very difficult.

“While we’re glad summer has finally arrived, extreme temperatures like those forecast for this week can be risky for people working outside,” Ms Kearney said.

“Throughout the heatwave workers need to stay hydrated, keep cool and take regular breaks.

“We know that working in extreme conditions can have adverse effects on the health and safety of workers yet unfortunately there are cases every summer of people working without adequate hydration, working for too long in the sun and not having access to shelter.

“Casual workers or young workers who have just entered the workforce may not be aware of the risks or precautions they should take.”

Ms Kearney said the risk factors that workers should be aware of include the air temperature, humidity, radiant heat, wind speed, the level of work activity, levels of fluid loss and replacement, the effectiveness of protective clothing, physical fitness of the individual and pre-existing conditions such as heart disease.

“Signs and symptoms of heat illness can include heat rashes also known (and felt) as ‘prickly heat’, dehydration and heat cramps. This can progress to heat exhaustion which is characterised by clammy, moist skin, weakness and fatigue, nausea, vomiting, headache and fainting and ultimately heat stroke, a very serious and potentially life threatening condition,” Ms Kearney said.

“People experiencing any of these symptoms should seek immediate medical attention.”

Ms Kearney said it was also important for workers to talk to their employer about working conditions on hot days.

“Employers must provide a safe working environment and on hot days that can include altered work arrangements, adequate breaks or even the cessation of work once the temperature reaches very high levels.”

Ms Kearney said that healthy work tips for people working in hot weather include:

- Regularly drink cool water (about 200mls every 15-20 minutes) and do not allow yourself to become thirsty
- Avoid fizzy and caffeinated drinks which can dehydrate you
- Wear sunscreen and light coloured, loose clothing made of natural fibres wherever possible
- Take regular breaks in a cool, sheltered place
- Monitor your physical condition and that of your co-workers
- Try and schedule work for the coolest parts of the day and rotate workers through tasks that are particularly heat exposed.

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