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For immediate release:

August 17, 2006

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Working Safely in the Heat

Working during the summer in Oregon, especially outdoors, can be uncomfortable when the temperature hits 90 degrees and above. Combine high temperatures, high humidity, and physical exertion, and you may develop a work-related heat illness. The most severe heat-induced illnesses are heat exhaustion and heat stroke. If heat exhaustion is not treated promptly, the illness could progress to heat stroke, and possibly even death.

Workers on construction sites may be at greater risk for heat illness due to heavy exertion, enclosed operator cabs with poor air circulation, and prolonged exposure to the sun.

Employers and co-workers should be alert for common indicators of heat exhaustion. A person coping with heat exhaustion will still sweat but may experience extreme fatigue, nausea, light-headedness, or a headache. The person could have clammy and moist skin, a pale complexion, and a normal or only slightly elevated body temperature.

To help workers suffering from heat exhaustion:

- Move them to a cool, shaded area. Don't leave them alone. If they are dizzy or light-headed, lay them on their back and raise their legs about 6-8 inches at the feet. If they are sick to their stomach, lay them on their side.
- Loosen and remove heavy clothing.
- Give them some cool water to drink (a small cup every 15 minutes) if they are not feeling sick to their stomach.
- Try to cool them by fanning them. Cool the skin with a spray mist of cold water or a wet cloth.
- If they do not feel better in a few minutes, call for emergency help (911).

Workers can be at increased risk when they take certain medications. It's important to have workers check with their doctor, nurse, or pharmacy to see if medicines they take may affect them when working in hot environments. People who have experienced a heat-induced illness in the past or must wear personal protective equipment while on the job, are at higher risk for heat illness.

If heat exhaustion goes unnoticed or is left untreated, heat stroke can result. In extreme situations, heat stroke may lead to death. Heat stroke is a different condition than heat exhaustion. There are several reactions that occur in the human body with heat stroke: dry, pale skin (no sweating); hot red skin (looks like a sunburn); mood changes; irritability and confusion; and collapsing (person will not respond to verbal commands).

Follow the same steps for responding to heat stroke as with heat exhaustion. However, there are some critical differences for treating this medical emergency:

- Call for emergency help immediately (ambulance or 911).
- Keep the person in a cool area; if a seizure is under way, remove objects close to the worker that could be harmful.
- Try to find ice for cooling packs while medical services respond. Place ice packs in the armpits and groin area.

The ideal situation is to prevent heat illness by protecting workers. Have them:

- Learn the signs and symptoms of heat-induced illnesses and what to do to help other workers.
- Perform the heaviest, most labor-intensive work during the coolest part of the day.
- Slowly build up tolerance to the heat and the work activity (this usually takes up to two weeks).
- Use the buddy system to monitor the heat (work in pairs).
- Drink plenty of cool water (one small cup every 15-20 minutes).
- Wear light, loose fitting, breathable clothing (such as cotton).
- Take frequent short breaks in cool, shaded areas — allow your body to cool down.
- Avoid eating large meals before working in hot environments.
- Avoid caffeine and alcoholic beverages (these beverages make the body lose water and increase the risk of heat illnesses).

A "Heat Stress Safety" pocket reminder card is available from Oregon OSHA. You can download the card, in both English and Spanish, from Oregon OSHA's Web site, www.orosha.org, under "Publications"; look for "Heat Stress Card" (#3333E). The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) also has a booklet with heat stress prevention tips called "Working in Hot Environments." The booklet is available for download from NIOSH's Web site, www.cdc.gov/niosh/hotenvt.html.

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