

Heat and raised summer temperatures: Effects on nursing staff in the workplace (June 2023)

Working in hot weather – when temperatures in the workplace can be significantly elevated – can be uncomfortable, increase the likelihood of accidents and injuries and have an adverse effect on nursing staff's health. It can also impact on patient safety, particularly where nursing staff are dehydrated or experiencing heat stress.

There is no legal maximum temperature for workplaces, however the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations require employers to provide a reasonable indoor temperature in the workplace.

Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations, employers must:

- assess the risks of working in high temperatures to nursing staff
- put suitable controls in place to protect them from adverse effects.

As heat is a hazard, workplace temperature should be factored into activity/area risk assessments for nursing staff, including those working in the community. In addition, heat/increased temperatures should be considered in individual risk assessments for nursing staff with health conditions which may be exacerbated by heat. Heat should also be considered in pregnancy risk assessments.

Employers should consult with nursing staff and trade union representatives on the proposed measures to manage workplace temperatures.

Potential risks to staff of increased workplace temperatures

The main risks include:

- not drinking enough cool liquids (dehydration)
- overheating - which is a risk for people who already have certain health conditions including problems with their heart or breathing
- heat exhaustion and heatstroke.

Risk	Signs and symptoms
<p>Dehydration</p> <p>Not drinking enough cool liquids</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling thirsty • Dark yellow and strong-smelling pee • Peeing less often than usual • Feeling dizzy or lightheaded • Feeling tired • A dry mouth, lips and tongue • Sunken eyes • Headache
<p>Heat exhaustion</p> <p>Heat exhaustion occurs when the body overheats and cannot cool down, if action is not taken to cool down, heat exhaustion can lead to heatstroke.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tiredness • Headache • Dizziness and confusion • Loss of appetite and feeling sick • Excessive sweating and skin becoming pale and clammy or getting a heat rash, but a change in skin colour can be harder to see on brown and black skin • Cramps in the arms, legs and stomach • Fast breathing or pulse • A high temperature of 38C or above • Being very thirsty • Weakness • Feeling faint <p>If someone is showing signs of heat exhaustion, they need to be cooled down and given fluids.</p>
<p>Heatstroke</p> <p>Heatstroke is where the body is no longer able to cool down and body temperature becomes dangerously high.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion • Lack of co-ordination • Fast heartbeat • Fast breathing or shortness of breath • Hot skin which does not sweat • Seizures <p>Heatstroke is a medical emergency</p>

Sun exposure

Nursing staff who work outside, even for short periods of time, are at risk of sun burn and skin damage caused by ultraviolet (UV) rays in sunlight.

Nursing staff are unlikely to work outdoors for prolonged periods of time but may be involved in supporting groups on trips and community nurses travel to patient/ service user's homes.

Nursing staff involved in work outdoors should cover as much skin as possible, use a minimum of SPF15 factor sunscreen on any exposed skin and should try and stay in the shade wherever possible. Anyone with fair/ freckled skin that doesn't tan or burns easily, has red or fair hair and light-coloured eyes or has a large number of moles should consider additional measures including wearing a hat that covers the ears and back of the neck.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Nursing staff who are required to wear PPE including respiratory protection, eye protection, aprons etc are at risk of increased body temperature when working in high temperatures. Employers should review the risk assessment for the activity that requires PPE and implement additional measures, such as ensuring PPE is only worn for the task requiring it, discarding single use PPE when taking breaks, taking breaks more frequently and wearing lighter, loose fitting uniforms.

Weather forecasts and health alerts

In England the MET office, in partnership with the UK Health Security Agency, operates the [Heat-health Alert Service](#) from June to September each year. The service forewarns of periods of high temperatures, which may affect the health of the public, using a green to red colour warning system, red being the most serious, indicating a significant risk to life.

Devolved nations have their own threshold action levels and members living or working in those locations should refer to the advice issued by the devolved administrations.

[Cymru/ Wales](#)

[Northern Ireland](#)

[Scotland](#)

We strongly encourage RCN Representatives to ask their employer for information on how workplace temperatures will be adequately controlled during hot weather.

Reps should ensure that the employer has suitable plans in place, in advance, for heat/ raised temperatures in the workplace. Questions can be raised at the Safety Committee.

Reps can support members with complaints about heat/ temperature in the workplace by raising them with the employer.

The checklist in appendix A provides some examples of questions that could be used to establish what controls are in place to protect nursing staff.

Further information:

[Temperature: What the law says \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk/temperature/)

[Temperature: Thermal comfort \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk/temperature/thermal-comfort/)

[Workplace temperature checklist - Temperature HSE](https://www.hse.gov.uk/temperature-checklist/)

[Heat-health Alert service - Met Office](https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/health/alerts/heat-health-alert-service)

[Extreme Hot Weather - Public Health Wales \(nhs.wales\)](https://www.nhs.uk/health/alerts/extreme-hot-weather)

[Hot weather advice | nidirect](https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/hot-weather-advice)

[Keep yourself safe in hot weather \(ready.scot\)](https://www.ready.gov/keep-yourself-safe-in-hot-weather)

[Working in hot weather: Employers asked to help workers | HSE Media Centre](https://www.hse.gov.uk/media/working-in-hot-weather)

[Nuthall: Fire warning after sunglasses cause car blaze - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55888888)

[RCN Rest Rehydrate Refuel](https://www.rcn.org.uk/health-ability-passport)

[Health Ability Passport | Peer Support Service | Royal College of Nursing \(rcn.org.uk\)](https://www.rcn.org.uk/peer-support-service)

Appendix A

Heat and raised summer temperatures: Managing the risks to staff

Management planning and risk control	Yes/ No/N/A		Comments/ further action
Have risk assessments for tasks and activities and/or a working area e.g. a ward, taken into consideration hot weather/ increased workplace temperatures in line with weather forecasts and relevant alerts?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Have staff and Trade Union Reps been consulted on the control measures for managing heat/ increased workplace temperatures?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Are business continuity and emergency preparedness plans in place for periods of extreme heat e.g. in line with an amber/ red alerts (<i>England</i>)?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Are individual risk assessments undertaken for individuals with health conditions (including those experiencing difficulties with the menopause) which are adversely affected by heat/ temperature in line with weather forecasts and relevant warnings?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Is the employer aware of the RCN health ability passport to support individuals who have specific requirements and need reasonable adjustments?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Where health ability passports are used are they reviewed/ updated to support specific adjustments required when temperatures rise (in line with controls identified in the individual risk assessment)?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Do pregnancy risk assessments identify heat/ workplace temperature as a hazard for consideration with individuals and are controls reviewed in line with weather forecasts and relevant warnings?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Are mechanical ventilation systems including air conditioning, cooling and HVAC systems inspected and maintained in line with manufacturer requirements and where required are statutory periodic thorough tests and examinations completed every 14 months as a minimum?	Yes No N/A	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	

Considerations and controls for nursing staff working in a single location/ building:	Yes/ No/N/A		Comments/ further action
Are there thermometers on display in work areas to enable the temperature to be monitored?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Do windows have blinds/ reflective film to reduce direct sunlight?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Does the building have good ventilation to assist with keeping the workplace cool? This may include:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> natural ventilation – opening doors/ windows to allow in fresh air, or 	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> mechanical ventilation which supplies fresh/ cool/ purified air to working areas 	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Are any workstations positioned away from direct sunlight or sources of heat?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	N/A	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Are heat sources properly insulated e.g., is there insulating materials around hot plant and pipes?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	N/A	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Are staff encouraged and able to take increased breaks to rest?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Do staff have easy access to cool drinking water?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Do staff have access to cool rest areas for their breaks?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Are uniforms made from loose breathable fabrics?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Will there be any flexibility in staff being able to wear alternative clothing/ uniform during extreme heat?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Considerations and controls for nursing staff working in a single location/ building:	Yes/ No/N/A		Comments/ further action
Where staff are required to wear PPE has the employer considered:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> whether the tasks/ activity need to take place 	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> where tasks need to continue, introduced flexible working patterns e.g. reducing amount of time spent undertaking tasks in PPE 	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> increasing the frequency of breaks 	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> single use PPE which is changed regularly 	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> additional uniform and opportunities to change uniform 	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Will flexible working patterns be in place e.g. rotating staff, moving staff to work in cooler areas of a building?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Are staff provided with information on how to keep cool and stay hydrated?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Are staff, particularly those who work night shifts, provided with advice and support on getting good quality sleep in hot weather/ increased temperatures?			
Are staff trained to recognise the signs of heat exhaustion/ dehydration?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Are staff aware of the need to report any incidents relating to heat/ raised workplace temperatures through the employer incident reporting system?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	

Nursing staff working in the community	Yes/ No/N/A		Comments/ further action
Are there plans to consider the way that work is organised during very hot temperatures/ amber and red alerts (<i>England</i>)? e.g. reducing the need to travel during the hottest part of the day between 11am-3pm	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Do risk assessments consider the risk of damage/ overheating of medical equipment and supplies transported in vehicles during hot weather/ increased temperatures?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Do risk assessments consider the amount of equipment/ supplies that community nurses need to carry during hot weather and how this can be managed to reduce strenuous tasks/ activities?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Do risk assessments consider the risk of fire from items left in a vehicle when unattended e.g. prescription sunglasses? Are staff provided with advice and information?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Are staff advised to park vehicles in shaded areas where possible?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Are staff provided with reflective windscreen covers to reduce sunlight/ glare into the vehicle when parked?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Are staff provided with and advised to wear sunscreen?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Are staff advised to ask service users/ patients to open windows, where possible, during their visit?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Will work be managed to ensure that staff are able to take increased frequent breaks to rest?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Do staff have easy access to cool drinking water? e.g. provided with reusable water bottles	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	
No		<input type="checkbox"/>	

Do staff have access to cool rest areas for their breaks? e.g. encouraged to find somewhere shaded for their breaks	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Are uniforms made from loose breathable fabrics?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Is there any flexibility in staff being able to wear alternative clothing/ uniform during extreme heat?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
When extremely high temperatures are forecast, is consideration given to alternative ways of working e.g. remote work?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Where staff are required to wear PPE has the employer considered:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> whether the tasks/ activity need to take place 	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> where tasks need to continue, introduced flexible working patterns e.g. reducing amount of time spent undertaking tasks in PPE 	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> increasing the frequency of breaks 	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> single use PPE which is changed regularly 	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> additional uniform and opportunities to change uniform 	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Are staff provided with information on how to keep cool and stay hydrated?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Are staff trained to recognise the signs of heat exhaustion/ dehydration?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Are staff aware of the need to report any incidents relating to heat/ raised workplace temperatures through the employer incident reporting system?	Yes No	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	