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Keeping workers safe during a heatwave during COVID - by Joseph Camilo

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The way we in the construction industry think of “safety” has certainly expanded in recent months. It used to be that safety meant ensuring that all our employees made it home to their families every night. Then came COVID, and a whole new set of precautions to keep our people healthy and our industry functioning with it.

A recent heatwave reminds us that we must also take steps to protect employees from exposure to the sun and heat while abiding by COVID-19 health guidelines. The fact that it’s hot this time of year is not exactly front-page news, but it’s too easy to forget to take the necessary precautions in the midst of focusing on the many steps we’re already taking to keep the Coronavirus at bay.

The first step is to encourage employees to wear the right clothing. Cotton soaks up sweat and stays wet longer, which keeps heat from penetrating the body. Loose-fitting garments are preferable since they maximize the breathability and airflow that help cool the skin and body.

It’s also a good idea to wear opaque clothes since they keep the sun’s ultraviolet rays from penetrating the cloth. But while opaque is good, lighter colors are better than darker, since dark colors retain heat rather than reflecting the sun’s rays as lighter colors do.

Though it might sound counter-intuitive, it’s better to wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts, which protect employees from the sun’s rays. Sunscreen with a minimum sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 should also be used and be reapplied at least every two hours.

Wide-brimmed hard hats or hats with an attachable brim also protect from the sun.

When it comes to protecting people from the sun and heat, several important steps aren’t clothing-related. They include taking breaks in the shade and making sure to stay hydrated. When it comes to hydration, avoid drinks with caffeine or large amounts of sugar. Alcohol also makes things worse, so employees should avoid drinking large amounts of alcohol on a night before work.

Even during these unprecedented times, it is possible to build safely. But while implementing

stringent COVID precautions and PPE requirements on job sites, we can't forget the important measures that keep our employees safe in the sun and heat of summer.

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